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Scoto-Scandinavian 'Ring-Money' and Ireland

John Sheehan



'Ring-money' is the term used to describe a distinctive type of silver ring manufactured in Scandinavian Scotland during the mid 10th and mid 11th century, where it may have been used as a form of currency. Although the term was used by 19th-century antiquarians and ethnologists to describe ring-shaped objects from various periods and cultures, including the Viking Age, its usage in now generally restricted to the particular type of ring that is characteristic of Viking Age Scotland. The aim of this paper is to outline and consider the occurrence of this diagnostically Scoto-Scandinavian cultural artefact type in Viking Age Ireland.

Background

The development of 'ring-money' may be ascribed to the Scoto-Scandinavians, as is suggested by its distribution patterns (Graham-Campbell 1995, 49-54; Fig. 1). However, the background of the type appears to lie in a number of arm-ring forms represented in a group of hoards from Ireland and northern England, and in a small number of hoards from Norway with insular connections. These arm-rings, formed from lozenge-sectioned rods, differ from 'ring-money' in that they may occur in annular as well as penannular form, are usually more substantial in size and weight, and sometimes bear stamped decoration. The dating evidence for the hoards in which they occur indicates that they were current before the accepted date-range of 'ring-money', from the mid 10th century onwards. Examples of this type are present, for instance, in the coinless hoards from Tynan Demesne, Co. Armagh (Paterson 1962), Raphoe, Co. Donegal (Graham-Campbell 1988), and Carraig Aille II, Co. Limerick (Ó Ríordáin 1949, 62-64), which are datable to before the mid 10th century largely on the basis that they contain examples of Hiberno-Scandinavian broad-band arm-rings. They are also present in the coin-dated hoards from Cuerdale, Lancashire, deposited *c.* AD 905-10 (Graham-Campbell 2011, pls. 40-2), and the Vale of York, Yorkshire, deposited *c.* AD 928 (Ager and Williams 2009, 113, no. 217.3), in which Hiberno-Scandinavian silver forms are also present. Similar rings are found in the hoard from Grimestad, Stokke, Vestfold (*Universitetets Oldsaksamlings Årbok 1935–36*, 268–73), and in a small number of other finds from Norway, which also tend to feature Hiberno-Scandinavian elements. Two rod fragments of lozenge-shaped section, unstratified finds from the Viking *longphort* at Woodstown, Co. Waterford, may be derived from developed 'ring-money', but the 9th-century date for this site makes this seem unlikely. The Carraig Aille II decorated ring fragment, noted above, is formed from a rod of the same dimensions as these fragments, and was deposited probably during the late 9th or early 10th century, suggesting that the Woodstown material may derive from plain rings

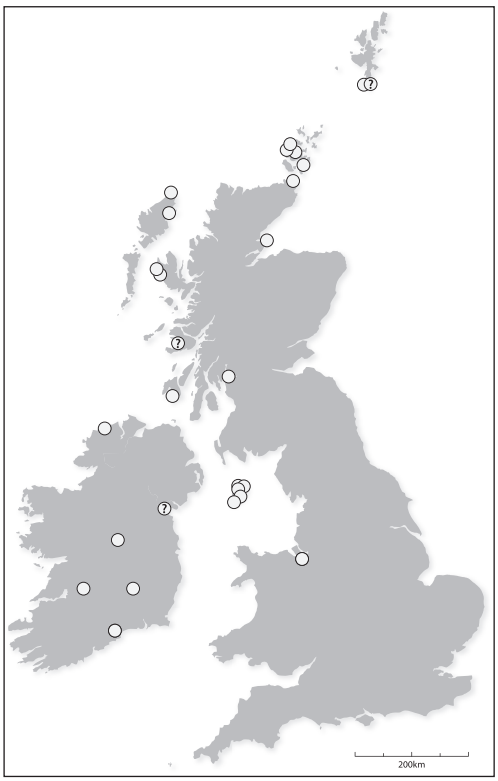


Fig. 1. Distribution of hoards containing Scoto-Scandinavian 'ring-money' in Britain and Ireland.

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of the same type (Sheehan 2014, 203-5, fig. 7.59). It appears that the origins of the standard form of Scoto-Scandinavian 'ring-money', for which the term 'developed ring-money' has been proposed (Graham-Campbell and Sheehan 2007, 536-37), may lie in these earlier arm-ring types from Ireland and the Irish Sea region.

The main characteristics of Scoto-Scandinavian developed 'ring-money' may be summarised as follows: they are rings of penannular form, almost invariably unornamented, with hoops typically formed from single rods of circular- or lozenge-shaped cross-section (though one or more angles of the latter type may occasionally be somewhat flattened, creating a polygonal cross-section); the terminals may be straight cut and blunt, or taper to points, but they are commonly flattened and spatulate in form. Developed 'ring-money' forms the most frequently represented type of ring in the hoards from Scotland, where it occurs in a large proportion of the finds, including the well-known hoards from Skaill and Burray, Orkney, deposited *c.* AD 960-80 and *c.* AD 997-1010 respectively (Graham-Campbell 1995, 38-40, 51-52). Its occurrence in these and other coin-dated hoards, both in complete and hack-silver form, indicates that 'ring-money' generally dates to the period between the mid-10th and mid-11th century, a period when the manufacture of other silver arm-ring types had largely ceased in Viking Age Britain and Ireland and when some Scandinavian communities were operating in coin-minting economies. In England and Wales, and elsewhere in the Viking world, 'ring-money' is somewhat rare, though it is a feature of the Irish Sea region, particularly on the Isle of Man, where it forms a dominant trait of at least four hoards, one of which may be related to the general location of the Balladoole boat burial (Graham-Campbell and Sheehan 2007). Given that 'ring-money' is characteristic of the hoards from the Northern and Western Isles, and was presumably made there, it is not surprising that it also turns up on Man. It may have been developed as part of the economic system of the Orkney Earldom of Sigurd II, *c.* AD 960-1014, and that of his successor, Thorfinn, *c.* AD 1009- *c*. 1065, which they extended to include the Western Isles and Man (Crawford 2013, 120-25). The Earldom also had involvements in Dublin, and elsewhere in Ireland, while Maccus and Guðrøðr Haraldsson, of the Hebrides, who campaigned in Munster and the Irish Sea zone in the later 10th century, were sons of Haraldr, king of Scandinavian Limerick (Sheehan 2010, 24-25). These connections provide potential political and economic contexts for the occurrence of 'ring-money' in Ireland.

There were different types of silver economies in existence during the Viking Age and 'ring-money' may characterise overlapping social / bullion economies in Scandinavian Scotland. The rings may have been weight adjusted, and quantum analysis of the weights of a large sample of examples from Scotland and the Isle of Man suggested that they were manufactured to a standard unit or target weight of 24±0.8gm (Warner 1975). Studies of scale balance weights, rings and ingots from various areas of the Viking world indicate that target units in the mid 20gm range were in operation in the various silver economies, representing variations on the *eyrir*, the Scandinavian ounce (Sheehan 2013, 52).

Ireland

Given the nature and duration of Scandinavian settlement and interaction in Ireland, it is not surprising that large numbers of Viking Age hoards have been found there. In fact, around one hundred and thirty-five silver hoard deposits dating from the 9th century to the mid-11th century AD are on record, representing a quantity of hoards not equalled outside of Scandinavia during this period. The bulk of these, sixty-three examples, are 'coinless hoards', composed exclusively of non-numismatic silver, twenty-one are 'mixed hoards', in which coins occur alongside non-numismatic silver, most of which date to the mid- and late 10th century, while the remaining fifty examples are coin hoards, of which thirty-five were deposited in the AD 950-1050 date range. Many of the coin hoards, in terms of their bullion weight, are relatively small, while the coinless and mixed hoards, by their nature, are heavier, sometimes considerably so. Consequently, it is the latter categories of hoard, with their ornaments, ingots and hack-silver, which generally account for the great bulk of the considerable amount of silver wealth in Viking Age Ireland. It is within these two categories, given their composition, that one might expect to find Scoto-Scandinavian 'ring-money' and, given that together they amount to eighty-four finds, it is interesting to note that these rings definitely occur in only five of these hoards, a proportion of only 1:17. It should be borne in mind,

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however, that a very significant number of the hoards from Ireland were deposited before the mid-10th century, the initial stages of the development of 'ring-money', and, consequently, that the proportion of post-950 hoards from Ireland containing 'ring-money', though impossible to estimate with any degree of accuracy, must be significantly greater than the figure noted above.

The five hoards from Ireland known to have contained 'ring-money' comprise the following: a mid 19th-century find from the Co. Clare side of the River Shannon (Sheehan 1982); an early 20th-century find from Knockmaon, Co. Waterford (Jennings 1912), with a coin-dated deposition of *c.*AD1000 (Blackburn and Pagan 1986, 297, no. 195); a find, made in the 1970s or early 1980s, on Corran Island, Lough Sewdy, Co. Westmeath (Sheehan 1998, 202), apparently in association with a silver coin of Eadmund (*British Numismatic Journal* 58 (1988), 154, no.159); a find, made in 1999, in Dunmore Cave, Mohil, Co. Kilkenny, with a coin-dated deposition of *c.*AD 970 (Bornholdt Collins 2010, 25-35); and a recent find, made in 2011, at Lurgabrack, Co. Donegal (Kelly and Sikora, forthcoming). In addition, the mixed hoard from Allardstown (Killincoole), Co. Louth, discovered in 1859 ('Proceedings and papers' 1865, 373-76), with a coin-dated deposition of *c.* AD 970 (Blackburn and Pagan 1986, 296, no. 154), contained a piece of hack-silver, now lost, which, on the basis of its published description, possibly derived from 'ring-money'. There are also six unprovenanced examples of 'ring-money' from Ireland, both complete and fragmentary, in the collections of the National Museum of Ireland and the British Museum (Sheehan 1982, 103), though whether these represent single finds or hoards is unknown, to which may be added a recent single find of a complete ring from Inishargy, Co. Down (Sheehan 2012). Together, this amounts to a minimum total of twenty-five examples of 'ring-money' from Ireland, of which twenty are complete examples.

Some interesting patterns emerge when these five hoards are considered in relation to Ireland's early medieval over-kingdoms (Fig. 2). No less than fifty-three of the total recorded silver hoards from Ireland dating up to *c.* AD 1050 are from the strong Southern Uí Néill kingship, which extends across the midlands from the Irish Sea to the River Shannon, broadly comprising the northern half of the modern province of Leinster. It is clear, from both general distributional considerations and from the tendency for many of the finds to derive from Irish settlement sites, that the Southern Uí Néill hoards represent Irish, rather than Scandinavian, wealth, even if it was the existence of Dublin which made the silver available (Kenny 1987, 512). Reflection on how this silver wealth was acquired often focuses on the economic relationships that must have existed between the Irish and the Scandinavians, though other potential mechanisms for silver exchange, such as political alliances, gift-exchange, ransoming and, perhaps most importantly, tribute, must also have been of significance on different occasions. Some of the finds appear to be socially motivated, while others may have been more economically inspired and represent the use of silver as currency, whilst others appear more likely to signify tribute: each of these distinctive types of hoards is represented among the large numbers of finds in Southern Uí Néill.



Fig. 2. Map of Ireland showing its early medieval over-kingdoms, Hiberno-Scandinavian towns and the locations of hoards containing Scoto-Scandinavian 'ring-money'.

If one were to envisage, on the basis of the available archaeological evidence, where in Ireland the occurrence of 'ring-money' is likely to be most

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abundant, Southern Uí Néill would inevitably be selected, both instinctively and on statistical grounds, as well as on the basis of the historic links between Dublin and the Orkney Earldom. Yet, despite its plenitude of Viking Age silver, only one hoard in this kingdom contains 'ring-money', a small find of two rings and a possibly associated coin, from Corran Island, near its western end (Fig. 3). The rings in this find feature spatulate terminals, the earliest recorded evidence for which is in the hoard from Ballaquayle (Douglas), Isle of Man, deposited *c.* AD 970 (Graham-Campbell 2011, 104), which suggests that this find dates to the 970s or later. The most plausible explanation for the surprising dearth of 'ring-money' in the hoards from Southern Uí Néill, assuming that rings of this type were imported into Dublin in greater quantities than the hoard evidence suggests, is that many of them, along with ingots and other forms of non-numismatic silver, were consigned to the crucible for conversion into coin following the establishment of the Dublin mint in the closing years of the 10th century. In this regard, it is worth noting that there is only a single mixed hoard on record from Ireland from the first half of the 11th century, a find containing a rather small ingot from Fourknocks, Co. Meath, deposited *c.* AD 930 (Dolley 1966, 63-64).



Fig. 3. 'Ring-money' from the hoard from Corran Island (Lugacaha), Lough Sewdy, Co. Westmeath. (National Museum of Ireland)

If Scoto-Scandinavian 'ring-money' was being converted into coinage in Dublin, this does not seem to have been the case in the southerly over-kingdom of Mumu, the broad extent of which included the kingdoms of Osraige, Lóigis and Uí Failge, now in modern Leinster, in addition to the area covered by the modern province of Munster. Twenty-seven of the hoards are from Mumu, of which twenty-one are of the coinless and mixed categories. Interestingly, however, three of these finds contain 'ring-money' and, at 1:7, this is a significantly greater proportion than the overall figure for its occurrence in such hoards in Ireland. Presumably this is partly because there was no mint in the Hiberno-Scandinavian towns of Limerick, Cork and Waterford, which might have consumed bullion silver, though the general scarcity of coin hoards in Mumu also indicates that coin was not retained here to the same extent as in Southern Uí Néill. However, the linkage between parts of Mumu and the Hebrides and Man, evident in the historical sources, also appears to be relevant in explaining the reasons for the apparently higher rate of 'ring-money' occurrence in this kingdom.

The lost hoard from Knockmaon was found close to Dungarvan Bay, within the hinterland of Waterford, in an area which had a Hiberno-Scandinavian presence up to the 13th century (Bradley 1988, 64-65). It contained three fragments of 'ring-money', as well as Hiberno-Norse, Anglo-Saxon and continental coins. The latter included French feudal deniers, a type of issue which is not otherwise on record from Ireland. Interestingly, however, examples of continental coins occur in three hoards from Scotland, two of which also contain 'ring-money': Burray, in Orkney, deposited *c.* AD 997-1010, and Tarbat, in Ross-shire, deposited *c.* AD 990-1000 (Graham-Campbell 1995, 131-44), while the lost rings from the third find, from Inch Kenneth, Argyll, deposited *c.* AD 998-1002, may also have been of this type (*ibid*. 57). These three hoards are broadly contemporary, and the association within them of 'ring-money' and continental coins clearly suggests that the Waterford hoard was assembled, at least in part, in Scandinavian Scotland. Viking Waterford was ruled by the dynasty of Ímar, which was also involved in the Scandinavian kingdom of the Western Isles and Man, and the historical sources evidence occasional connections between these two areas during the later 10th century (Downham 2004, 86, 92).

The hoard from the Clare side of the River Shannon, now lost, comprised three examples of 'ring-money'. The fact that the terminals of one of the rings were of spatulate form suggests that the find may date to the 970s, or later, for reasons referred to above. Given that it was found somewhere along the river between Limerick and Killaloe, it may be regarded as deriving from an area of Hiberno-Scandinavian influence. It should be considered within the context of two nearby hoards, those from Skehacreggaun (Mungret) and Scattery Island, both of which are also from the fringes of the hinterland of Hiberno-Scandinavian Limerick, which may have been of greater extent than proposed by Bradley (1988, 62-

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64). All three finds share Scoto-Scandinavian connections of some type and seem to form a late 10th-century hoarding horizon. The Skehacreggaun hoard comprised ingots, ingot-derived hack-silver and Anglo-Saxon coins and, on the basis of the latter component, its deposition has been suggested as *c.* AD 953 (Blackburn and Pagan 1986, 296, no. 135). Bornholdt-Collins has examined its numismatic element and suggests that this was assembled 'in or near' the Isle of Man, on the basis of the presence of cut halfpennies, which is a characteristic of Manx coin hoards (2010, 35). The Scattery Island hoard, from the Shannon estuary monastery of Inis Cáthaig, comprises two incomplete Irish brooches. However, it should be regarded as a Scandinavian-type hoard on the basis of the occurrence of nicking on one of the brooches, as well as the literary and annalistic sources which firmly link Scattery Island with the Hiberno-Scandinavians of Limerick, involving the Haraldsson brothers and Hebridean *løgmenn*, in the 970s (Downham 2007, 190; Sheehan 2010, 24-26). It appears, given the historical linkage between Scandinavian Scotland and Limerick, and on internal evidence in the hoards themselves, that the River Shannon, Skehacreggaun and Scattery Island finds should be viewed together as forming a fairly compact hoarding horizon of Scoto-Scandinavian background in this part of Mumu, which is only partially expressed through the occurrence of 'ring-money'.

The final Mumu hoard containing 'ring-money' is that from Dunmore Cave, Mohil, in the kingdom of Osraige. This is a hack-silver find, which Bornholdt Collins has dated to *c.* AD 965 on the basis of its numismatic element (2010, 31). It comprises a single, complete example of 'ring-money' (Fig. 4), a rod, a brooch-pin fragment, a small 'droplet' of casting waste and three pieces of ingot-derived hack-silver, as well as over a dozen Anglo-Saxon coins or fragments, and it appears to have been folded within a high-quality garment, associated with belt-fittings and a series of cone-shaped 'buttons' made of woven silver wire. The ring is very similar in form to a number of examples in two large hoards from Orkney: Skaill, deposited *c.* AD 960-80, and Burray, deposited *c.* AD 997-1010 (Graham-Campbell 1995, 116-17, nos. 40-7, pls. 42-4; 131-32, nos. 10, 20, pls. 54, 56). The 'buttons' find parallel in the Isle of Man, while the belt-fittings fall into a corpus of material known mainly from Dublin, the Hebrides and the Isle of Man (Bornholdt Collins 2010, 26-27). On the basis of its non-numismatic contents, therefore, the assemblage from Dunmore Cave appears to show clear connections with the Western Hebrides and Man. This may suggest a background for it involving the Haraldsson brothers and their Hebridean followers, like the other hoards from Mumu considered above.



Fig. 4. 'Ring-money' from the hoard from Dunmore Cave, Mohil, Co. Kilkenny.

The final hoard to be considered here is the recent find from Lurgabrack, near Horn Head on the Donegal coast, in the kingdom of Northern Uí Néill (Fig. 5). It is the only such find from this kingdom, though the lost hoard from Allardstown (Killincoole) may have contained a piece of hack-silver derived from 'ring-money'. The broad extent of Northern Uí Néill, which included an overlordship of Airgialla, stretched from the modern counties of Donegal, through parts of Derry and Tyrone, in the modern province of Ulster, as far as the modern county of Louth, in modern Leinster. Only seventeen of the one hundred and thirty-five silver hoards dating up to *c.* AD 1050 from Ireland come from this kingdom, of which most are of the coinless and mixed categories. However, given its geographical proximity to Scotland, as well as the historically-attested linkages between Northern Uí Néill and the Hebrides (Purcell and Sheehan 2013, 55), it might be expected that 'ring-money' would be occur more commonly in Ulster's hoards. However, the recent single find of 'ring-money' from Inishargy, on the Ards Peninsula, close to Strangford Lough, in the kingdom of Ulaid, has increased the number of find locations.

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Fig. 5. The hoard of 'ring-money' from Lurgabrack, Co. Donegal. (National Museum of Ireland)

The Lurgabrack hoard consists of eight complete examples of 'ring-money', making it the largest such find on record from Ireland, comparable in size to the hoards from Kirk o'Banks, Caithness, and Ring of Brodgar, Orkney (Graham-Campbell 1995, 129-30; 95-96). Although a coinless hoard, the presence of three rings with terminals of spatulate form indicates that it may date to the 970s, or later, for reasons referred to above. Two of its rings are virtually duplicates of one another, being made from rods of almost circular section, tapering to blunt terminals with flat ends, with almost exactly the same weight; in addition, both bear traces of hammering which were almost certainly made using the same tool. The fact that this pair stayed together suggests that it was not in circulation for very long, as does the fact that none of the rings in the hoard bear nicking. It is interesting to note that the only coin hoard from this part of Northern Uí Néill, a small deposit of Anglo-Saxon coins from Carrowen (Burt), at the base of the Inishowen peninsula, was deposited *c.* AD 970 (Dolley 1959), and that these two finds comprise the only post-950 hoards on record from this part of Ulster. Their location may reflect the apparent connection of a group of earlier coinless hoards in this area with the royal centre at Ailech (Purcell and Sheehan 2013, 50, 55). On the other hand, it is interesting to note that Lurgabrack is located only a few kilometres west of Rinnaraw, where Fanning excavated a Viking Age house with parallels in the Scottish Isles (Comber 2006). Together these finds may indicate that this coastal area of Donegal shared a Viking Age cultural tradition with Scotland.

Conclusions

The background of the morphological development of Scoto-Scandinavian 'ring-money' seems to lie in arm-ring forms that were current in Ireland and the Irish Sea area during the first half of the 10th century. While the latter were sometimes ornamented by stamping, this is not a feature of developed 'ring-money', and it may be that Scandinavian Scotland was influenced in this regard by the silver-working tradition of Viking Age Norway, in which stamped ornament is rather uncommon. While developed 'ring-money' is the most frequently represented type of ring in the hoards from Scotland and the Isle of Man, it occurs in only a small proportion of the hoards from Ireland. However, some interesting patterns are apparent in these finds. For instance, the general lack of 'ring-money' in the hoard-rich kingdom of Southern Uí Néill may indicate that rings of this type were normally consigned to the crucible for conversion into coin following their arrival into Dublin after AD 997. The southern kingdom of Mumu, on the other hand, has produced a significantly greater proportion of 'ring-money', possibly due to the historically-attested linkage between its Hiberno-Scandinavian towns and their hinterlands with the Hebrides and Man. Indeed, the hoard evidence from the Limerick hinterland indicates that the Scoto-Scandinavian background in this part of Mumu is, perhaps, only partly conveyed through its 'ring-money'. The single hoard of this material from Northern Uí Néill, the recent important find from Lurgabrack, along with other evidence, may possibly represent the existence of some level of a shared cultural identity between parts of this kingdom and Scandinavian Scotland.

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