

## Silver and the Great Viking Army

Andrew Woods, Senior Curator of the Yorkshire Museum, was our speaker for this year's Sue Margeson Memorial Lecture. He gave a talk about the types and ways in which silver was used at the site of Torksey, 14km north west of Lincoln, where a Viking over-winter camp dated AD 872–3 has been identified.

From AD 865 to 879 a Great Viking Army (in Old English, *micel here*) wreaked havoc on the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, leading to conquest and settlement in the area known as Danelaw. This army, formed from several different groups, landed in East Anglia in 865 then moved around the country and over-wintered. Little is known about it: documentary sources provide few insights into its activities and intentions, and archaeological evidence is scant with only a small number of finds. Repton in Derbyshire (873–4) is the best known site, a small enclosure of half a hectare centred around a church with a ditch and bank. It produced numerous finds including a large mass burial of a few hundred men.

Previous finds were hoards as in Gotland AD874, which produced 15,000 coins plus ingots and rings, but over the past twenty years, several 'productive' sites, of coins and other metalwork have been discovered in eastern England by metal-detecting. Previous scholarship has been significantly enhanced by new finds including Torksey from the 1990s onwards; the Vale of York Hoard of 2009 with 617 coins and 67 objects deposited around AD 927; and the Bedale Hoard found in 2012, likely 9th-century and consisting of display items, ingots, neck rings, brooches and rings all broken up. Andrew produced a map of the geographical distribution of many single finds across East Anglia, Lincolnshire and Yorkshire and some in the Midlands, *i.e.* the Danelaw area, which correlate with Great Army camps. Such finds show a Viking mentality, chronological change and geographic extent.

Torksey is recorded in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* AD872 entry: 'the army went into

Northumbria, and it took up winter quarters at Torksey, in Lindsey; and then the Mercians made peace with the army' – no further details are given. The camp lay on higher ground along the River Trent in a boggy flood plain; a defensible site chosen for its strategic location and access to resources. Mark Blackburn worked with the Fitzwilliam Museum on a list of metal detectorist finds, and published a paper in 2011. 'The Viking winter camp at Torksey, 872–3', in *Viking Coinage and Currency in the British Isles*. Exploration of the site is now a University of Sheffield Project which, from 2011 to 2015, undertook an archaeological evaluation at Torksey as part of a wider research agenda – geophysical surveys, fieldwalking trial and test-pit excavations.

Andrew produced a summary of over 1000 archaeological finds: 40 silver pennies from south of the Humber; 124 fragmentary Arabic coins cut into smaller sizes; 174 copper alloy *stycas* from Northumbria. The English coins were from the 850s/60s/70s. mainly Aethelred II (841–9) and Osberht (849–67) from Northumbria but nothing after 875. Islamic coinage, brought from Scandinavia, showed nothing after 867. Sets of bullion weights were also discovered, both standard use and personalised ones; chopped up decorative gold pieces, ingots of copper alloy used as bullion and silver droplets from working the metal. A few solid whole gold coins exist and some coins have bronze inside and gold outside. Lead items struck by coin dies are evidence of imitation coins, with lead dies for other items such as brooches and English-style strap ends and arm-rings using fake hack-gold from the site.

A number of conclusions have been drawn from these finds, which are evidence of intense trading activity and exchange of silver coins and pieces which were dropped and lost. They demonstrate a different set of economic values regarding transactions with multiple metal economies operating simultaneously: gold, silver and copper alloy all used in both coined

and bullion form. A minority of transactions were conducted in English coins which had a value above and beyond the metal content, so these were not cut up like the Islamic dirhams. The latter are fragmentary tiny pieces not common in Britain, weighing less than 1 gram, which were used for small, precise transactions. The silver droplets, gold-covered bronze coins and lead dies are evidence of metalworking for a monetary purpose/exchange. Everything points to a tri-metallic system of gold/silver/bronze for display items, bullion and coinage use for exchange.

The Great Army was not a single unified force, but comprised multiple warbands drawn from different parts of Scandinavia which had separate experiences of and uses for metal. The Torksey assemblage and evidence offers a radical reappraisal of the character of the Viking winter camps and their interaction with the local population. It demonstrates the scale of wealth plundered and processed for intensive trade in goods and services, plus the development of a hybrid economy with monetary and bullion transactions different from elsewhere in Scandinavia and Britain.

Sophie Cabot thanked Andrew Woods for a very informative and interesting talk. He answered several questions from the floor. As the last dirham was dated 867 it is difficult to say whether new recruits came from Scandinavia after that date but probably local recruits including Anglo-Saxons fought alongside the Vikings against the different kingdoms of Northumbria and Mercia. Most of the silver was brought over with the Great Army including the Islamic coin pieces which came originally from Arab countries. The pieces were used commercially to purchase provisions, clothing, weapons, decorative items and probably slaves.

*Edmund Perry, Hon. Secretary*