

Reasons for hiding Viking Age hack silver hoards¹

Different motives are indicated by researchers as the reasons for hiding treasures by our ancestors in prehistory. One is danger, another lack or excess of some sort of goods, still others are specific beliefs, or many other. The Viking Age was the period of extremely intensive deposition of metals in the history of Europe. The hoards deposited at that time contain in most cases hacked silver scraps. The researchers indicate various reasons for both hiding such hoards and for cutting up coins and jewellery. However, in the recent numismatic literature the economic interpretations dominate. A long discussion was more about the significance of contents of these deposits, and the conclusions drawn from it (Suchodolski, 1995, 67-71), because of the presupposition, that independently on motives, which make man to hide a hoard, the silver was taken from markets, and reflects the economy of a given region. Lately, this stable strong opinion has been changed by a few archaeologists, who have gone back to old, almost forgotten interpretations (Staecker 1997, 89-103; Urbańczyk, 2002, 209-222).

It's necessary to point out, that those archaeologists indicate that there are two, opposite camps impossible to cross – *confessors of economic rationalism and the followers of great role of irrational behaviours in every part of human life* (Urbańczyk, 2002, 209). This point of view is of course a misunderstanding, and none of modern numismatists puts these two ideas in such opposition (Kiersnowski, 1960, 15, 479-480; Tabaczynski, 1959, 41-47; 1987, 178-186; Grønder-Hansen 1992, 104-112; Hårdh, 1996, 131-132; Suchodolski, 1998, 371-378). On the contrary, almost all of them divide hoards into three main groups. In the first one we have the finds, which were the "economic" hoards – hidden into the ground as a thesaurization of money. Those hoards contain to a large extent whole coins, but also hacked coins, ornaments, and amorphous forms of silver. The metal had the character of means of payment or of accumulation of value. In the second group we find the hoards which contain mainly the uncut ornaments, which were the accumulation of value, and the preservation of prestigious

items – symbols of power and richness. The third and last, group is composed of the hoards of cult, with a religious character. The significance of this group lies not in the content of the hoard, but its context. A "cult deposit" is a hoard which was hidden in a place from where it couldn't have been undertaken – like rivers, lakes and swamps.

In the older literature we can find quite different explanations of this problem. The most popular was S. Bolin's work (1929, 86-145), who suggested that there was a direct connection between wars and hoarding. According to Bolin's opinion the concentration of hoards in time and space was a designate of violent times – War. The reaction for Bolin's hypothesis was a total opposition, best represented in V. Jammer (1952, 39-43), W. Hävernack (1956) and G. Hatz (1974, 143-162) works, who said, that the concentration of hoards in time and space was a designate of fertility times, and impoverishment richness of people. Another interpretation of Viking Age silver hoards was given by A. Gurievich (1976, 220-244), who doesn't believe in its economic character. The Viking Age hack silver hoards were in his opinion mainly sacrifices, and the hacking was a form of ostentation the power of rulers. However, it is worth to point out that all of the above mentioned opinions are unilateral. The researchers usually support one of the reasons and deny or diminish the others. In later works all of these opinions were crossed, and today's scholars recognize the complexity of motives.

As it was mentioned, in last years few archaeologists have turned to an old interpretation, underlying the symbolic and religious character of Viking Age silver hoards. The same motives are given for hacking and bending the silver objects. This thesis is best presented by P. Urbańczyk, who published some works in

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which he refurbishes A. Gurievich's old thesis about the main symbolic meaning of the silver in the early middle ages, and about the cult character of the hoards. P. Urbańczyk believes that the hoarding was determined almost only by religion, magic and symbolism (Urbańczyk, 2002, 209-222).

But the biggest problem with Viking Age markets is not if, but when it begins to use metal money in everyday transactions. That, metal money was used in such transactions, we know from written sources. Thanks Ibrahim ibn Ja'kub we know even prices of some goods (Kowalski 1946, 49). P. Urbańczyk mentions the Ibrahim's text, but few lines after he writes that: *By silver people didn't buy the meat or grain, by silver there were buying politically loyalty, which was overturned to "gifts" in meat and grain. The day's salary wasn't paid in silver. By silver they didn't pay taxes* (Urbańczyk 2002, 214). In my opinion buying meat by silver doesn't hinder from buying by the silver politically loyalty. In the matter of salary and taxes it's better to quote the words of Ibrahim: *Received by him (king Mieszko I) taxes are trade weights. They are used as payment for his men (knights). Each month to each man it's a known number of it* (Kowalski 1946, 50). Here is necessary to comment the term trade weights —*matāqil murqatīyya*. Ibrāhīm might have known the name of dirhems, the western European denars he called *Kinszar*, so I think that Ibrāhīm noticed the hack silver, taken not for pieces, but for weight. This relation doesn't mean that salary and taxes weren't paid in animals, grain or any other goods. But it shows, that in this matter it isn't possible to give only one single answer.

In P. Urbańczyk's opinion the use of silver had mainly elite character, and it took place between the politically active chieftains. Trade wasn't motivated by life needs. Goods, which were the object of trade, had more prestigious meaning —were used to demonstrate the power and richness of the elite and the leaders. They were intended for the consumption during the collective rituals. It's necessary to remind, that in the ceremonial exchange the form of the silver was very important. It seems that not only the metal itself, but also its form was the aim of such exchange. In Viking Age societies very often the object of ceremonial distribution was any kind of rings, neckrings, bracelets, etc. (Fig. 1). It was caused by the belief that this kind of ornaments had the magical power. They were symbols of power and richness both of Gods (arming Draupnir, fingerring Herföð) and of a human,

too. Granting with this, it's good to remember, that even those forms of ornaments with their most magical character were also some form of money (Lundström 1973, 64-80). We know it surely from the names: in old Russian language the word *grivna* means both neckring and money. Similarly, the old Norse word *baugr* means both ring and money. That's why this form of ornaments was used in ceremonial exchange, and not any other symbols of power. That's why we shouldn't transfer a character of some special form to any other things made of the same material.

Waste and distribution of goods were with no doubt a symbol of a high social status, but to do this kind of distribution it was necessary to have a permanent source of this goods, which were a symbol of richness and prestige. The loot was not enough to have a needed number of goods. Loot was a good, but risky way of growing rich. That's why the Vikings quickly started to trade with the far living societies, to get the hardly available luxury goods, which were of a big value. That's why so called "barbarian" societies needed the trade with Roman Empire, and later Byzantium, the Franks and Arabian Caliphates (Sawyer 1982, 5; Hedeager 1988, 147-153). Those societies needed from each other different goods. Both "sides" had profit on it. We shouldn't understand it literally. I don't think that there was any organized interaction between the *civilization of money* and *civilisation of furs*, which we could perceive in the spirit of H. Pirenne or K. Polanyi.

In Viking Age, places strictly connected with the economy and religion were so called *Ports of Trade* on the coasts of Norse and Baltic Sea (Polanyi 1963, 30-45; Ambrosiani, Clarke 1991; Łosinski 1994, 101-127; Herrmann 1995, 57-72; Hodges 2000). The economic and productive character of this places was a reason of the influx of a large number of coins and unformed silver, which is very well documented in the archaeological sources. In the most important places, as Ribe, Hedeby, Birka, Paviken, Wolin, Truso, Dągmale and others there was found a large number of single coins and pieces of silver (Wiechmann 1996, nr 3, 4; Zacharissón 1992, 52-63; Kiersnowscy 1959, nr 201-220; Czapkiewicz, Jagodziński, Kmietowicz 1988, 157-169; Urtans 1977, nr 31, 50, 78). Also in the near regions a lot of hack silver hoards were found. This kind of *Ports of Trade* were always connected with cult centres. They had profits on it in form of temple payments (Polanyi 1978, 92-96). The best known samples are some earlier finds from

Sorte Muld on Bornholm or Gudme and Lundeberg from Fionia –the so called Guldgubber (Fig. 2), which are interpreted as temple sacrifice money (Watt 1992, 195-227). After all, the main aspect of existing for this ports was the trade with which we should connect the finds of silver hoards.

P. Urbańczyk believes that exchange in Viking Age was build almost only on rituals. And as far as the role of trade in Viking Age is concerned I believe that we can listen to the abbeſs Aelfrik who lived in XI century England, who described different professions. The merchant tells about himself that he serves for the King, for the rich men and all the people. He takes the goods into his ship, and travels to faraway lands. He sells it and buys other things, which lack in his kingdom. He transports them through storms and pirates, sometimes loosing everything in the sea. Aelfrik ask him if he sell this things for the same price, that he bought them? The merchants answers that in this case what he would have for his fatigue? What he bought he sell for a bigger price, to feed his wife and children (after Gurievich 1996, 307). I believe that abbeſs Aelfrik is right, not P. Urbańczyk.

Also other sources from Viking Age shows clearly that the coins and silver had their economic meaning for Vikings. Ahmad ibn Fadlān noticed around 922/3, that the wife's of ar-Rūs merchants: *are wearing gold and silver neck rings. When the man has ten thousand dirhems, he ordinates to make for his wife one neck ring, and when he has twenty thousands dirhems, he ordinates to do two neck ring for his wife. So, sometimes one wife has on her neck lot of such neck rings.* In other place, ibn Fadlan meets one ar-Rūs merchant who prays: *I want to meet a merchant, who will have a lot of dinars and dirhems, and I want him to buy from me on my prices, as I want, and that he will not beat down with me.* (Kmietowicz 1985, 30). Ibn Rosteh in *The Book of expensive gems* from beginning of 10th century noticed, that: *the only thing that ar-Rūs are doing, are trade with squirrel, sable and other animals furs, which they sell to everyone who wants to buy it. As a payment they are taking money, which they hide in their ornamented belts* (Lewicki 1977, 41).

It's important to analyse the arguments about fragmentation of silver (Fig. 3). P. Urbańczyk tells that the aim of this was to ritual destroy the known, locally understood symbolic value of ornament. He doesn't believe that it was done to have smaller units of silver for everyday transactions (Urbańczyk 2002, 215-216). The main argument is that this hacked ornaments are of local

origin. If the hack silver was money, their form wasn't important, and we should find mostly the fragmented coins and the ornaments of foreign origin (sic!). First, we are finding this kind of coins – dirhems, and oriental ornaments, too. But even if we didn't, this argumentation is hard to accept. It's hard to believe that someone who wants to destroy a symbolic form cut silver into pieces weighting 0,1-0,2 g. I can understand this "magical" motivation when the neck ring is divided to 3, 4 or even 20 ones. But the most popular hack silver weights around 0,2 g. It means that a standard neck ring was divided to ca. 500 or even 1000 pieces. The ritual of destroying the symbols took place only when the symbol is recognized. But if people cut an uncharacteristic small piece from another uncharacteristic small one, the reasons of this must be different.

P. Urbańczyk didn't pay attention to the chronology of the process. The first wave of the oriental silver comes to the Baltic Sea in the very end of the 8th century, and with some small breaks it flows up to the end of 10th century (Noonan 1994, 215-236). The western silver began to come into the Baltic zone in a larger amount in the middle of this century (Kiersnowski 1960, 178). The beginning of hacking silver is dated to the first half of 10th century, but the intensity of it took place in the second half of 10th century (Hårdh 1996, 107-111). So it took ca. 100 or even 200 years to work up foreign coins into the local ornaments, and after some time (few generations) they start to destroy them –making of them the money of a small value to use it in the everyday transactions or to produce of them a strongly divided silver mass of money, taken for weight. Looking at this problem from a perspective of few generations this is not irrational from the economic point of view. Dividing silver was probably caused because of the growth of local markets, and the need of smaller money unit. The hacking of silver isn't also similar in different regions and different times. We know that dividing of coins and ornaments took place in the Near East (the hoard from Susa) and Maghreb too (Ilisch 1990, 121-131). In Arabic written sources it's noticed that this was of economic reason (not enough small units of money), and there are the names of such hacked silver: *kusūr, qita', muqatta', bandūs, galla*, etc. (Lewicki 1949, 224-229; 1958, 11-14). Thanks to the analysis of weight of hacked silver form Sweden, Pomerania, Great Poland and Masovia we can say that in the south, the pieces of silver are lighter. In hoards from Great Poland the pieces weighting from 0,2-0,3 grams, and from 0,6-0,7 grams dominate. In hoards from Masovia in most cases we have the pieces weighting from

0,1-0,2 grams, and from 0,5-0,6 grams. So two norms of weights for every day transactions are recorded. But in Masovia the silver had higher value, because there was not so common as in Great Poland, and Pomerania (Kiersnowski 1960, 385-390). I believe that this example clearly shows that silver was used also in markets, not only in temples, and that the market system was the reason of dividing the silver into very small pieces.

Next aspect of hacking silver is the custom of pecking the silver objects (Fig. 4). There are three main interpretations of this custom (Sperber 1982; Duczko 2002, 193-208). The first one is that peck were testing marks, which had to test the quality of silver and eliminate the falsifications of coins. The other interpretation suggests that it was a custom which was used to confirm an exchange. The third one says that it was a magical custom, which had probably to clear the metal from the wrong power. The first thesis is now the most popular among the numismatic scholars (Sawyer 1982, 127-128; Malmer 1985, 49-56; Metcalf 1985, 91-100; Archibald, 1990, 11-24; Leimus 1990, 201-205; Gullbekk 1991, 64; Kilger 2003, 4-10). But remembering the number of such pecks on one coin (standard up to 20, but sometimes up to 30 or even 40 ones) and its deepness, I think that this "testing marks" hypothesis isn't correct. Testing the quality of silver which such pecks is as good or wrong as the sound or beating test. This custom is truly irrational from the economic point of view, but I think that it's connected in some cases with the exchange. The most probable is the second and third hypothesis together, because signing a piece of silver with a peck or nick to confirm a transaction is a magical custom itself.

However, if we can't agree in details with the scholars from "magical camp", we should discuss also with the pure economic view. But this discussion should be based on the sources, and the straight analysis of them.

To conclude my remarks about the reasons for hiding the Viking Age hack silver hoards, I want to stress that both written sources and excavated material, together with the results of complex research create a rather clear picture. Cutting of silver items were mainly due to the economic reasons –the will for obtain a monetary unit of a smaller value. It should be investigated whether such a cut up of the mass was accepted by the numbers of pieces or by weight. Another important reason for damaging the silver, mostly the ornaments made of it, was the need for manifestation. As far as the custom of pecking and bending of coins and silver decorations is concerned, it was most often a magical rite.

Regarding the reasons for the hiding of silver, the most common of them were economical (accumulation and preservation of capital). But also as a result of war (protection of capital from seizure, immediately hidden loots, tributes) and cult (religious sacrifices, signs of prestige). Here we should remind the information's from Thietmar, Herbord, Helmod and Saxo Gramaticus Chronicles. All of them mention the temple treasuries. All of these motives had to play an important role and to co-exist with each other. It seems that the attempts to separate them and designate one dominating reason are simply useless.

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Fig. 1. Silver rings from the Asarve hoard, Gotland (Knape 1994).

Fig. 2. "Guldgubbe" from Helgö, Sweden (Knape 1994).

Fig. 3. Hacked silver from the Cuerdale hoard, England (Graham-Campbell 1994).

Fig. 4. Nicks and pecks on Viking Age coins (fot. M. Bogucki).



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