

A hoard of Hiberno-Viking arm-rings, probably from Scotland

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ABSTRACT

A hoard of five Hiberno-Viking silver arm-rings, probably from Scotland, is reconstructed on the basis of three extant rings in the British Museum and five base-metal copies in the National Museum of Ireland.

THREE HIBERNO-VIKING ARM-RINGS IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM

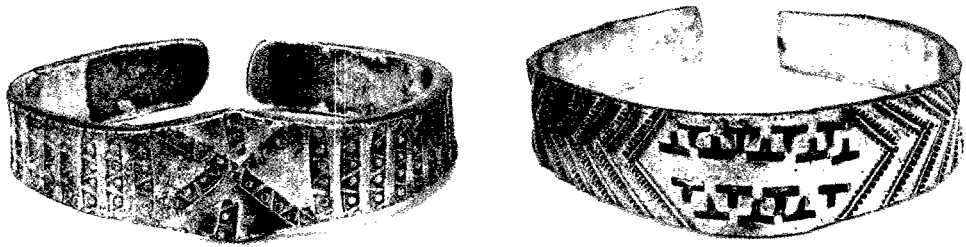
The British Museum possesses two fine examples of Hiberno-Viking silver arm-rings which were purchased, with other items, in July 1851, from A W Franks; he had bought them at the Edinburgh sale of ‘the Collection of Objects of Virtu of the late Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe, Esq., of Hoddam’ (sale catalogue issued by Tait & Nisbet, 12–18 June 1851, lot 506). The arm-rings (illus 1) had been sold together, and had been catalogued as ‘Two Curious Ancient Anglo-Saxon Silver Armlets, Engraved’; however, the British Museum Register (M & LA 51,7–15,8 & 9) contains the additional information about them that ‘Nos 8 & 9 were found in Scotland’. Scratched on the inner faces of both rings are the letters: an/N/R/ea.

It must be doubtful whether we shall ever learn the authority behind the Register’s specific statement that these two rings are of Scottish provenance. Given that they are singled out in this way amongst the material acquired by Franks at the Sharpe sale, it must be supposed that they came from his collection with some label, or other documentation, which had not been utilized in the preparation of the catalogue and which no longer survives. The statement is accepted here at face value, but under the circumstances – and in light of their having 19th-century copies in Dublin (illus 3), as described in the next section – the possibility of these fresh Hiberno-Viking rings having been found in Ireland, where the type was made (see below), cannot be excluded. In this context, it is relevant to note that the contents of Sharpe’s sale reveal him to have been a collector of Irish material, as of much else besides (eg lot no 493, an ‘Ancient Irish Crucifix, from the Collection of Major Sirr’, and lot no 496, an ‘Ancient Key, Inlaid with Silver, found in the Black Abbey, Kilkenny’).

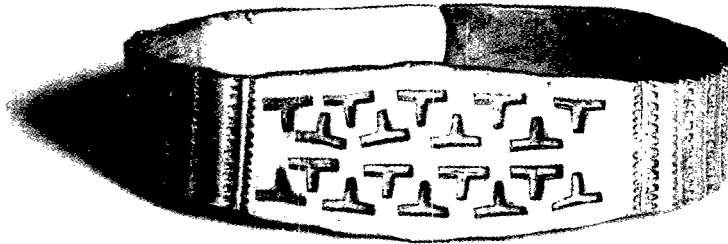
The introduction to Tait & Nisbet’s catalogue quotes (pp vi–vii) from the *Gentleman’s Magazine* (1851, i, 559) that ‘Mr. Sharpe’s collection of antiquities is amongst the richest which any private gentleman has ever accumulated in the North’. However, its own picture of Sharpe’s house and its contents is far more vivid and so is worth quoting in full (p vi):

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ILLUS 1 Two Hiberno-Viking silver arm-rings (left 51,7-15,9; right 51,7-15,8), probably from Scotland, in the British Museum (diam: 73 mm & 76 mm) (Copyright: Trustees of British Museum)



ILLUS 2 An unprovenanced Hiberno-Viking arm-ring (O.A.10303) in the British Museum (diam: 68 mm) (Copyright: Trustees of British Museum)

Mr. Sharpe's house might be most fitly termed the Scottish Strawberry Hill. It partook in no degree of the character of a museum, but was the mansion of a gentleman of refined antiquarian tastes, whose books, pictures, furniture, china, coins, and ornaments of all sorts, were selected to gratify his own peculiar *penchant*; while his costly antiquarian treasures, exquisite enamels, bijouterie, ivory, and oak-carvings, and rarities of every description, were enclosed in cabinets accessible only to their owner and his favoured visitors.

The British Museum also possesses another complete Hiberno-Viking arm-ring (illus 2) which has been ornamented with the same two punches used to decorate one of the rings from the Sharpe Collection (51,7-15,8). Unfortunately, there are no known records of its acquisition or provenance (O.A.10303), but scratched on its inner face is a similar group of letters to those noted above on the Sharpe rings: *o/N/C*. A further feature which links together all three rings is the presence in a similar position on each of a single deep nick, cut from the same direction into an inner angle, c 20-30 mm from the end of the terminal. Such nicking represents a characteristic Viking-age method for testing the quality of the silver.

These three features combine to indicate an intimate association for these three Hiberno-Viking broad-band arm-rings, but the third ring does not feature amongst the 1269 lots of the 1851 Sharpe sale. It must be supposed therefore that the code marks were added to the rings at an earlier date, perhaps by Sharpe's unknown supplier.

These three penannular rings, and their stamped ornament, are fully described and illustrated in Graham-Campbell's catalogue (1995) as hoard no 21, with 51,7–15,8 & 9 listed as nos 21,1 & 2, respectively, and with O.A.10303 as no 21,3.

FIVE COPIES IN THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF IRELAND

A curious fact concerning the shadowy history of these British Museum rings is that base-metal reproductions of them exist in the collection of the Royal Irish Academy, now in the National Museum of Ireland. However, these three full-size, hand-stamped copies actually form part of a group of five, there being with them two further such ornamented rings (illus 3), the originals of which are no longer known to exist. The Dublin rings are numbered 12–16, relating to some unknown catalogue or list: no 12 may be identified as a copy of 51,7–15,9; no 13 is a copy of O.A.10303; and no 15 is a copy of 51,7–15,8; the originals of nos 14 and 16 are lost.

We are grateful to Mr Ragnall Ó Floinn, of the National Museum of Ireland, for establishing that this group had once formed part of George Petrie's collection, which he left to the Academy on his death in 1866. Five 'Leaden penannular Armlet-shaped Object(s)' are listed as nos 58–62 (under 'Table Case 21. Drawer 20.21.27.28') in the manuscript 'Catalogue of the Petrie Collection of Antiquities in the Museum of the Royal Irish Academy' (p 53). This was compiled in 1874 by R J Mac Eniry who was Curator of the Academy's Antiquities Collection.



ILLUS 3 Five base-metal copies of Hiberno-Viking arm-rings in the National Museum of Ireland (clockwise from top left: 12, 13, 16, 15; in the centre: 14). (Copyright: National Museum of Ireland)

It is unfortunate that we do not know how, when or where Petrie acquired his leaden copies, but their association allows us to surmise the existence during the mid-19th century of a hoard, not just of two or three, but of five complete Hiberno-Viking arm-rings from Scotland. One might further surmise that copies were made on discovery and sent to Petrie for comment, in the same manner that drawings and engravings of such objects were being circulated amongst the antiquaries of the day (cf Graham-Campbell 1976, pl 4 & 5). The hoard was subsequently dispersed, only for three of the five rings to be reunited by chance in the British Museum; two remain missing, but these are described below from their copies in the hope that it may prove possible to identify them at some future date.

Detailed comparison between the silver rings in the British Museum and their base-metal counterparts in Dublin demonstrates that the maker of the latter intended them to be basic *copies* rather than actual *replicas* of the originals. The expanded mid-portions of 51,7–15,8 and O.A.10303, for instance, reflect reasonably accurately those of the originals; on the other hand, the distinctive, angular nature of the expanded mid-portion of the third ring is not reflected in its copy (51,7–15,9). There are also slight variations from the originals in the form of the terminals of each of the copies, while the widths of the mid-portions of 51,7–15,8 and O.A.10303 vary by c 2 mm from those of the originals. The layout of the stamped ornament on the copies is generally accurate, with 51,7–15,8 and O.A.10303 being particularly well executed in this regard. The copier used a number of different stamps of which all, except for that intended to replicate the bar-stamp with scalloped edges on arm-rings 51,7–15,8 and O.A.10303 (Graham-Campbell 1995, fig 28, 46), are close in form and size to those used on the original rings. It may be concluded from this that, in terms both of general form and layout of ornament, as well as of the general nature of the stamps used for their ornamentation, the Dublin base-metal rings labelled nos 14 and 16 are most probably to be regarded as reasonably accurate copies of their lost originals (illus 4).

THE LOST HIBERNO-VIKING ARM-RINGS (illus 4)

In so far as is possible, the following descriptions follow the format of those of the extant rings from this postulated hoard in Graham-Campbell's (1995) catalogue of Viking-age silver from Scotland (no 21,1–3):

4 *Base-metal copy of penannular arm-ring* (no 14), of Hiberno-Viking type, formed from a broad band of rectangular section, with punched ornament on its outer face; the expanded mid-portion tapers evenly to sub-rectangular terminals. The broad central field is decorated with three longitudinal rows of diagonal crosses formed with two impressions from a T-shaped punch; the outer rows consist of seventeen such crosses, while the central one contains nineteen. On either side of this field extends a row of six vertical transverse impressions which is terminated with a diagonal cross and three further vertical transverse impressions; these impressions were made with the same punch as that used on arm-rings nos 1 and 3 to copy a bar-stamp having a plain centre between scalloped edges (Graham-Campbell 1995, fig. 28,46). The number '14' is written in ink on the inner face to which is attached a circular label marked 'P'. Diam 76 mm; Ht 25 mm (max)–9 mm (min); Th 2.5 mm.

5 *Base-metal copy of penannular arm-ring* (no 16), of Hiberno-Viking type, formed from a broad band of rectangular section, with punched ornament on its outer face; the expanded mid-portion tapers evenly to sub-rectangular terminals. The entire outer face is decorated with two longitudinal pairs of rows of roughly pear-shaped stampings, containing a central pellet, which converge at the terminals. Stamp total: 198. The number '16' is written in ink on the inner face to which is attached a plain white rectangular label. Diam 76 mm; Ht 23 mm (max)–11 mm (min); Th 2.5 mm.



ILLUS 4 Base-metal copies of two lost Hiberno-Viking arm-rings: no 14 (*left*) and no 16 (*right*), front and back views. (Copyright: National Museum of Ireland)

Both these copies thus share the same penannular, broad-band form of the three extant arm-rings and have related schemes of stamped ornament. Indeed, no 4 may even share the use of the same punch as nos 1 and 3, if the copier may be relied on to this extent. The diagonal-cross stamp, as imitated on no 4, is unusual, but there are two rows of such stamping around another Hiberno-Viking arm-ring (W.98) found in Ireland (Bøe 1940, 121; Roesdahl & Wilson 1992, no 363,g). The pear-shaped stamp used on no 5 is simply a version of the standard pellet-in-triangle type which was in common usage in both Scandinavia and the West at this period (cf Graham-Campbell 1995, fig 28,15–18).

OTHER HIBERNO-VIKING SILVER ARM-RINGS FROM SCOTLAND

In addition to the objects which form the main subject of this paper, there are four examples of Hiberno-Viking broad-band arm-rings on record from Scotland. A fragment found in a cairn at Blackerne, Kirkcudbrightshire, in 1756 (Graham-Campbell 1995, no S1), is ornamented with plain bar punches. A plain ring was found in 1863 on the left wrist of a female skeleton at Clibberswick, in the northern part of the Shetland island of Unst, with other grave goods, including a fine Borre-style trefoil brooch which suggests a likely date for the burial in the mid- to late ninth century (*ibid*, no S4). A problematic find is a stamp-decorated fragment which, in the 19th century, came to be incorporated into the Pictish treasure from Norrie's Law, Fife (Graham-Campbell 1991, 248, *illus* 3), and so is presumed also to have been found on the Largo estate (Graham-Campbell 1995, no S8). The fourth find, also a stamp-decorated fragment, is of particular interest in that it formed part of a small coinless hoard (now lost), found in about 1838 during the clearance of a prehistoric burial-mound, near Gordon in Berwickshire (Stobbs 1885); it was associated with a gold finger-ring, two silver ingots, and a fragment of silver brooch pin, apparently of Irish type (Graham-Campbell 1995, no 14).

DISCUSSION

Arm-rings of the Hiberno-Viking broad-band type form a very substantial portion of the impressive corpus of silver objects from Viking Age Ireland. There are over 100 individual examples on record and they occur, either whole or in fragmentary (hack-silver) form, in 23 recognized hoards. Apart from the Scottish finds discussed above, they also occur in hoards from England, Wales and the Scandinavian countries (particularly Norway and Denmark), but the contents of many of these deposits frequently suggest that they are all – or in large part – of Hiberno-Viking origin. A classic example in this respect is the Gordon hoard, noted above, as is also the well-known treasure from Cuerdale, Lancashire, in which a substantial proportion of its 30 kg of non-numismatic silver is demonstrably of Hiberno-Viking and native Irish origin (Graham-Campbell 1987, 339–40).

The occurrence of Hiberno-Viking arm-rings in a number of coin-dated hoards (Table 1) indicates that the type was developing during the second half of the ninth century AD and continued in general circulation until c 930–40 (Sheehan 1990, 125; as cited in Graham-Campbell 1995, 26–7).

TABLE 1
Coin-dated hoards containing Hiberno-Viking broad band arm-rings (tpq = *terminus post quem*)

<i>Provenance</i>	<i>Date</i>
Sønder Kirkeby, Denmark	tpq 846
Croydon, England	c 872
Cuerdale, England	c 905
'Co. Antrim', Ireland	tpq c 905
Dysart (no 4), Ireland	c 907
Magheralagan, Ireland	c 910?
Slemmedal, Norway	tpq c 915/20
Goldsborough, England	c 920
Grimestad, Norway	tpq 921
Bangor, Wales	c 925
Lymose, Denmark	tpq 996

The evidence of the finds from Ireland suggests that Hiberno-Viking arm-rings were manufactured there for the storage and circulation of silver as a form of currency in its bullion

economy, while serving also as status objects (cf that on the arm of the woman buried at Clibberswick, Unst). The ingots from which they were hammered into ring form appear to have been cast to variations on a target weight-unit of 26.15 g (Sheehan 1984, 57–65), which differs by only 0.45 g from the dominant weight-unit reflected in the scale-weight material from Viking Dublin (Wallace 1987, 206–7). While this target weight appears to be valid, it is also clear that the weights of Hiberno-Viking rings were not intended to be precise multiples or sub-multiples of it, and weighing would have been required during transactions, as was the case with the later Scottish ‘ring-money’, of the 10th to 11th centuries AD, discussed by Kruse (1993). It is of interest to note that the weights of two out of the three extant Hiberno-Viking rings from the Scottish hoard conform closely to multiples of the target weight-unit identified from the Irish material: at 78.26 g and 52.02 g, rings (2) and (3) appear to represent multiples of three and two respectively, differing by only 0.11 and 0.28 g from the target weights. However, the nature of a vibrant *Gewichtsgeldwirtschaft* or bullion economy necessitated the regular reduction of ornaments to hack-silver, and this forms a recurring element in Irish Viking Age hoards (cf the Scottish fragments from Blackerne, Gordon, and Largo).

The reconstructed Scottish hoard, on present evidence, consisted exclusively of complete objects in the form of five arm-rings. The only hoard with which it is directly comparable in both nature and content is that from Red Wharf Bay, Anglesey, which likewise consists of five complete Hiberno-Viking arm-rings in fine condition (Boon 1986, 99–102, figs 39 & 40). The fact that both of these impressive hoards from Britain are composed only of complete ornaments, given the absence of any such hoards from the large corpus of silver finds from Ireland, emphasizes the status value attached to Hiberno-Viking arm-rings, particularly once they were removed from the economic milieu in which they were produced.

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