



THE LENBOROUGH HOARD

By now, most people in Buckinghamshire with an interest in history and archaeology will know of the discovery by metal detectorists in December 2014 of a hoard of Anglo-Saxon coins buried in a lead parcel beneath farmland adjacent to the hamlet of Lenborough two kilometres from Buckingham town.

Ros Tyrrell, Finds Liaison Officer for the Portable Antiquities Scheme, which is based at Bucks County Museum, was present at the discovery and so was able to carry out the painstaking task of carefully retrieving from a hole in the local heavy clay soil what must be one of the largest collections of pre-conquest mediaeval coins in the country.

The following day, the Keeper of Archaeology from the County Museum drove the hoard to the British Museum, where they have been put under the care of Dr Gareth Williams, Curator of Early Medieval Coinage in the Department of Coins and Medals. On May 11th this year, he gave a talk to the Society in the Learning Zone of the Museum, to an audience that gained an insight into what a wealth of information can be won from such a gathering of coins from careful study by an expert.

Dr Williams has the task of sorting and conserving more than 5,200 coins, dating from the reigns of Aethelred who ruled 978 to 1016, and Cnut, king between 1016 to 1035. The coins are in variable condition; some show little of the wear that might have resulted from circulation from hand to hand, but others are much more heavily worn.

A number of them had been bent, perhaps the result of a test to ensure the purity of the silver, and two had been severed to make halfpennies, which was a common practice in this period, with the penny the only denomination minted in any quantity, but with a constant demand for smaller and less valuable coins.

Dr Williams' preliminary findings are that there is not a continuous sequence of coins from all the years over the period of the two reigns: it is as if there were originally two collections, one from the earlier years when Aethelred reigned, the other from the later years of Cnut's dominion.

This period straddles that moment of transition when the throne of the kingdom of England passed from the Anglo Saxon Aethelred of Wessex to Cnut the Dane, who ruled a great North Sea empire that included England, Denmark and much of Norway. It was a period of instability, when the kingship in this country passed from Saxon to Dane and then, following the deaths of Cnut's sons, back again to a Saxon.

There is perhaps significance that the hoard was discovered close to the town of Buckingham, a fortified *burh* founded by the Wessex kings as a defence against Danish incursions; perhaps too it is significant that Watling Street, the boundary between the Danelaw and Saxon England is only 20 kilometres to the north east. Also nearby, no more than a kilometres to the south is the low hill that was at the time of the burial of the hoard the place of assembly of the Rowley Hundred Moot.

Dr Williams' preliminary findings might indicate the possibility that what may have originally been two collections of coins were brought together before eventually being buried. Interestingly, while London is the most common mint from both reigns, the coins dating from Aethelred's included a large number were minted in Wessex, the former kingdom lying to the south and west of Buckinghamshire, whereas the later coins dating from Cnut's time include a large number originating from mints to the north and east.

What explanation may be given to this change in the origins of the coins in the collection must be speculative, but it does accord with a possible change in the geographical orientation of trade patterns that occurred once all England was incorporated into Cnut's great Danish empire. One surprise is that, though the nearby town of Buckingham had been the site of a mint at the time of the burial of the hoard, only a few of the coins were actually minted in Buckingham.

What is to happen to the hoard?

Under the Treasure Act of 1996, coins composed of precious metal and over 300 years old have to be assessed by a coroner who decides whether they are Treasure under the meaning of the Act. If this hoard is thus defined as Treasure, it will be valued by the Treasure Valuation Committee, an independent body answerable to the secretary of State.

Until this valuation, we can only speculate what the coins are worth on the market, but the sum will certainly be substantial. The hoard might be split up and sold to museums and private collectors, but is this what Buckinghamshire people can contemplate with equanimity? There are surely many in the county who might prefer that the coins be kept together as one collection and retained here and displayed in the County Museum in Aylesbury. and there are solid academic reasons for doing so too – there are a number of potential avenues of future research, such as die linking analysis, that need the coins to be present, and would not be possible if the hoard was split up.

Of course, the purchase of the hoard would be a major expenditure and the Museum does not currently have the necessary financial resources. It might be possible to purchase a selection of coins – including presumably those actually minted in the town of Buckingham, but this decision will be made by the Trustees of the museum, and will be based in part on what the final valuation is.

Although the Museum hopes that much of the funding will be obtainable by grants from national bodies such as the Heritage Memorial Fund, and the Art Fund, there will need to be a significant element of local funding, and therefore there will be an appeal for donations from the public.

The Museum is currently asking for pledges that will give an indication of the intensity of interest in ensuring that this essential part of Buckinghamshire's historic heritage is kept within the bounds of the county, so even a small amount is important.

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