

A Viking-Age Coin of Norway Discovered in Shetland

by Michael Dolley

Recent research by the Swedish scholar Dr Brita Malmer has confirmed in the most satisfying manner the impression some of us already had that the first Norwegian coinage began shortly

¹ *CIL*, xiii, 11816.

² *CIL*, iii, 4441 (*ILS*, 3574); *CIL*, iii, 13475, 13497 (*ILS*, 3575); *CIL*, iii, 14089.

³ *CIL*, xiii, 8638.

⁴ *CIL*, xiii, 11721.

⁵ *CIL*, iii, 3393 and 4441 (*ILS*, 3574); *CIL*, iii, 10394 (*ILS*, 3516); *CIL*, iii, 10460 (*ILS*, 3573).

⁶ Klotz, Pauly-Wissowa, s.v. Silvanus, col. 123.

⁷ *Abhandlungen zur römischen Religion*, 78.

⁸ *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* s.v. caelestis.

⁹ *RIB*, 1131.

¹⁰ *CIL*, vi, 638 (*ILS*, 2954).

¹¹ 27th June 1963 to Dr K. A. Steer.

¹² *RIB*, 2144.

¹³ *RIB*, 2146, 2148.

¹⁴ *RIB*, 2160, 2161.

before the millennium with a very limited emission which is to be associated with the famous Olaf Tryggvason (997-1000).¹ No early medieval coin of Norway, however, is on record as having been found in a coin-hoard from Great Britain or from Ireland,² and no single-find of such a piece is known to the present writer. From Norway, too, Førstekonservator Kolbjørn Skaare of the University Coin Cabinet at Oslo has been kind enough to write that neither he nor his colleagues know of a Viking-age coin of Norway having been found in these islands. Through the kindness of Mr R. B. K. Stevenson, however, it is possible for there to be put on record details of a late eleventh-century coin of Norway which came to light in Shetland before the war, apparently as a casual and unstratified find from the eighteenth-century graveyard at the celebrated Jarlshof site at Sumburgh at the southernmost extremity of the mainland.³

The coin, in poor condition, seems not to have been deemed of any great significance at the time of its discovery, and passed with other unidentified material to the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland. It was only very recently that Mr Stevenson came upon it in the context of quite another investigation, and immediately realised its potential importance. Because of certain intriguing affinities to more than one of the later pieces in the Hiberno-Norse series, plaster-casts were sent to the present writer who hazarded the opinion that the coin was in fact Norwegian. This identification was subsequently endorsed on the basis of photographs of the plaster-casts by both the Swedish and the Norwegian authorities on the series cited in the first paragraph of this note.

The coin (Pl. 23b, c) is a silver penny with a mean diameter of 17 mm, though it is possible that the original diameter was slightly in excess of 18 mm, there appearing to have been a degree of loss by chipping or flaking around the circumference. It gives the impression, too, of being more than a little base, and certainly one should not attach too much importance to the recorded weight of 0.36 g (5.5 gr.). The obverse type consists of a highly formalised right-facing bust with a small cross before the brow, while the reverse type is essentially a voided short cross. For practical purposes the coin is anepigraphic, a few strokes with an hourglass-shaped punch being employed to give the semblance of a legend. Ultimately the types can be shown to derive from those of the *Long Cross* coinage of Æthelræd II of England, of all the English issues that most extensively copied alike in Ireland and in Scandinavia on account of its comparative simplicity, relatively high weight and very distinctive appearance. There can be no doubt, though, that this particular class of imitation belongs well over half a century after Æthelræd's death, while the inclination of the present writer would be to place the Jarlshof specimen as late as possible within any bracket which is thought acceptable for the Norwegian class as a whole. There is, however, one very useful indication of a *terminus ante quem*. What seems to be a die-duplicate – the obverse die is certainly the same – in fact occurred, so Mr Skaare informs me, in the celebrated Gresli find of 1878 from central Norway. Both pieces belong in consequence to the class of coin known as Stenersen Y 14.⁴

Coins of this class were originally dated by Schive, one of the giants of Nordic numismatics, to the early part of the reign of Olav Kyrre 'Peace-King' (1067-93), but the meticulous Stenersen's subsequent acceptance of Herbst's erroneous reattribution, in which Schive acquiesced, of certain

¹ B. Malmer, 'A Contribution to the Numismatic History of Norway during the Eleventh Century', *Commentationes de Nummis Saeculorum IX-XI in Suecia Repertis* (Stockholm, 1961), 225-376, and for this topic especially 229-33.

² Known to the writer, however, are at least two eleventh-century Danish coins occurring in hoards from the south of England (cf. M. Dolley, 'En penning fra Magnus den Gode fundet i England', *Nordisk Numismatisk Unions Medlemsblad* (1957), 253-6), and one fourteenth-century Swedish coin in

a hoard from Yorkshire (cf. M. Dolley and H. E. Pagan, 'An Early Nineteenth-Century Discovery of Edward Pennies at Knaresborough Priory', *British Numismatic Journal*, xxxii (1963), 117-26).

³ For the Jarlshof site generally cf. J. R. C. Hamilton, *Excavations at Jarlshof, Shetland* (Edinburgh, 1956), and the series of interim reports on the excavations by A. O. Curle in *PSAS*, lxxvi-lxx (1931-6).

⁴ L. B. Stenersen, *Myntfundet fra Graeslid i Thydalen etc.*, Oslo (Christiania), 1881.

coins of Magnus 'Barefoot' (1093-1103) to Magnus Haraldsson (1066-9) resulted in a fairly general tendency to date the Gresli hoard *c.* 1068 in order to take account of their absence from the find.¹ There can be little doubt, though, that Mrs Malmer is right when she dates the concealment of this all-critical find *c.* 1080. A coin such as that from Jarlshof, therefore, cannot well be dated later than *c.* 1080, but equally a date much before that would seem precluded by such factors as the general degeneracy of the coin's fabric, types and metal. That we are dealing with a Norwegian penny from the middle part of the reign of Olav Kyrre cannot well be disputed, and inevitably one is reminded of the fact that Olav was the immediate precursor of the celebrated Magnus 'Barefoot' who is thought to have visited Shetland, and presumably Jarlshof itself, more than once and certainly on his way to Ireland only a very few months before his death. It seems very unlikely, though, that the coin under discussion was brought from Norway on that occasion, if only because the early 1080s saw in Norway a major reform of the currency which would have made it unacceptable for continued circulation. There is the further consideration that the Jarlshof specimen does not appear to evidence any real degree of wear as opposed to corrosion. Rather we should look to the normal intercourse that must have flourished when Olav was King of Norway and Paul and Erlend, the sons of Thorfinn, ruled an area broadly corresponding to the modern Shetland, Orkney, Caithness and Sutherland. We do well to remember that Olav's mother Thora had been the first cousin of Paul and Erlend's mother Ingibjorg.



a Roman altar from Westerwood



b Norse Viking-age coin from Jarlshof, obverse above, reverse below (scale $\frac{2}{1}$)