

Special exhibit

The money of the Vikings

“Lord, deliver us from the fury of the Norsemen!” – this ninth-century supplication has played a crucial role in shaping our perception of the Vikings right up to the present day. The Vikings were undoubtedly fierce and ruthless when they sailed on raiding and pillaging forays and when their large, fast ships suddenly appeared on the coast or on the riverbank of major towns such as Cologne or Paris. The Viking attack on the Holy Island of Lindisfarne, off the coast of Northumbria, England, on 8 June 793 is generally regarded as marking the start of the roughly



The Bayeux Tapestry from the late 11th century depicts typical Viking ships

three-hundred-year Viking era. It is likely that accounts of such barbaric rampaging were sometimes exaggerated by Christian chroniclers, even though the most bloodthirsty among the invaders are said to have “howled like dogs, bit into the edges of their shields and walked barefoot through burning fire”. Archaeological finds modify this image of terror to some extent by documenting the Vikings’ peaceful side as farmers and traders. It was not only pillaging and ransacking but also the search for new areas for settlement and the extension of trade relations that led the Vikings to cover such large distances. Their trading ships were just as likely to show up in Icelandic ports as they were to appear in Constantinople and on the Caspian Sea.

There is some doubt about the exact origin and meaning of the term “Vikings”. It does not refer to a clearly defined ethnic group but rather to a large number of different peoples, principally from the area of present-day Norway, Denmark and Sweden. The “Swedish” Vikings who emigrated south-eastwards are known by the names of Varangians and Rus, from which the name “Russia” is derived.

Given this situation, there is no such thing as uniform “Viking money”. The many different pieces made by Nordic tribes, often imitating existing coin types, are therefore known collectively as “Viking-era coins”.



Solidus of Louis the Pious
minted between 814-840 AD



Frisian replica
from the period around 830-850 AD



Hack-silver find from the 11th century

One particular feature of trade in the Viking era between the ninth and 11th centuries is “hack-silver”. It was only the metal that was important, not its shape or form. Silver objects of all kinds, such as pieces of jewellery or parts of vessels as well as coins that had been hacked into pieces were placed as goods on the scales. The silver was exchanged for goods such as fur, hides, amber, honey and slaves and piled up into prestigious hoards weighing up to 10kg. These were displayed by their owners to selected guests.

*[The depicted find may be seen in the permanent exhibition
(third elevator display case from the left in the vault).]*

One major trading centre of the “Danish” Vikings was Hedeby on the Schlei inlet south of present-day Schleswig. Hedeby was created around 800 AD through the merger of three earlier merchant settlements located on easily navigable waterways and was a main loading and reloading point for trade between the North Sea and the Baltic; a mint was in operation there as early as the ninth century. The early Hedeby coins, of which only a few dozen are known to still exist, are based, albeit in a heavily modified form, on a large number of west European models.



Denar of the Danish king Hardeknud
(1035-1042) from the Hedeby mint

Further reading:

- Colleen Batey, Atlas of the Viking World, New York, 1994.
- Torsten Capelle, Die Eroberung des Nordatlantik, Neumünster 1987.
- James Graham-Campbell, The Viking World, 3rd edition, London, 2001;
- Silver economy in the Viking age, Walnut Creek 2007.
- Herbert Jankuhn, Haithabu: ein Handelsplatz der Wikinger, Neumünster 1986.