

The 1973 Viking-age Coin-find from Dunmore Cave

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DUNMORE Cave, five or six miles to the north of Kilkenny, is a well-known tourist attraction. It is in reality a whole complex of limestone caverns which run several hundred yards underground, and recently the Office of Public Works has gone to considerable expense to make them at once more accessible and less dangerous. Experts were brought in both to work over the hollows of the floor and to report on whether the deposits could in fact throw any new light on the Cave's history. The opinion has been widely held that men lived down there in pre-historic times, and there are also traditions of a massacre of refugees by the Vikings and rather more implausibly of another by the Confederate Catholics. Down the years, too, quite a number of fragments of human bone have come to light, and it seemed desirable to try to establish whether it is these finds that have touched off the tales of massacre or if in fact they provide much-needed corroboration. The experts called in were Dr. David Drew and Dr. David Huddart of the Geography Department of Trinity College, Dublin, while Dr. Michael Herity of the Archaeology Department of University College, Dublin, was appointed to exercise a general oversight of the whole operation.

At the very end of one of the deepest galleries is a huge stalagmite popularly christened the Market Cross, and in July 1973 work was begun on removing and evaluating successive layers of silt which had accumulated in a shallow depression near its base. Among numerous slivers of bone there came to light the broken half of a little silver coin no bigger in diameter than a modern 1p piece but very much thinner. It was immediately recognised as mediaeval, and within a matter of days it had been brought to the National Museum of Ireland where by a happy coincidence the present writer happened to be spending a few days investigating with a Finnish colleague certain aspects of the Hiberno-Norse coinage of Dublin. Even without cleaning enough of the coin could be seen to establish that it was the remains of a penny struck by the York Vikings in the early 920's, and the excavators were asked to look out for further pieces while the present

writer went off on a ten-week visit to the coin-cabinets of Scandinavia. On his return there was mustered for his appraisal a remarkable assemblage consisting of another nine silver coins and fragments thereof together with a little lump of silver that had been found at the same spot. The whole coins again were no larger than a modern 1p piece, and the smallest fragments no larger than a match-head and paper-thin.

One of the fragments has defied identification, but sufficient can be made out on the others for the coins to be recognised. Three are from Southern England, four struck by the Vikings in Northeastern England, and two have come from Asia. We may perhaps begin with these last inasmuch as they are the earliest coins in the find.

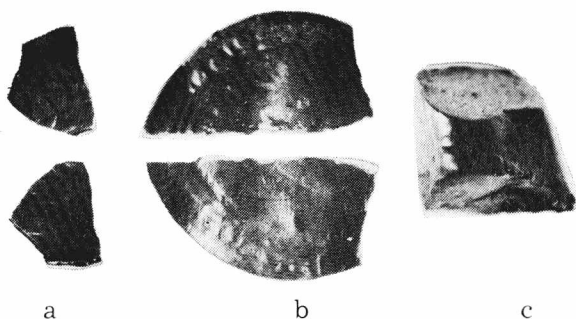


Fig. 1

One is very fragmentary [Fig. 1, a] but the epigraphy is characteristically Arabic, and Mr. Nicholas Lowick of the Department of Coins and Medals at the British Museum has confirmed that it is a broken piece of a *dirham* of the Eastern Caliphate struck somewhere about the end of the ninth century. As it happens it was precisely in the period c.875—c.975 that a number of these Kufic silver *dirhams* reached these islands by way of Russia and Scandinavia — the Swedish Vikings were both raiding and trading across the Black Sea and the Caspian — and the plotting of the find-spots shows a concentration in Eastern Ireland and the North of England. It can be shown, too, that most of the coins were lost in the first half of the tenth century, which is exactly the period when one and the same dynasty of Norse extraction was essaying to rule over the Vikings of Dublin and the Vikings of York. The larger of the two Kufic fragments from Dunmore Cave [Fig. 1, b] again comes from a *dirham* of approximately the diameter of our 2p coin, and this time Mr. Lowick can see enough of

the legends to be reasonably certain that it was struck for Caliph al-Mu'tamid who ruled over most of what is now the Middle East from 879 until 892. The mint-name is "Armenia" and indicates that it was struck at a place situated on the borders of the modern U.S.S.R. and Turkey. The route by which it had come to Ireland was a long one and most probably ran across the Black Sea and up the River Dnieper, across to Novgorod and the Gulf of Bothnia, and thence by way of Southern Sweden and Denmark either to the Scottish Isles or to Northern England.

The little lump of silver [Fig. 1, c] falls next to be considered. On examination it has proved to be the sheared end, apparently sawn off with a knife and not cut with a chisel, from a little ingot very much the size and shape of a slightly flattened cocktail sausage. As Mr. James Graham-Campbell of University College, London, has been showing, these little bars of silver are something particularly associated with the Vikings of Ireland, and their use is especially characteristic of the first half of the tenth century. Even without the coins from England, then, the student would be thinking of a date for the Dunmore Cave finds not too far removed from c.925, and, as we



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 Fig. 2

shall see, the English material in fact argues very strongly for a date after 925 and before 930.

A fragment of an English penny [Fig. 2, a] has on the obverse no more than the little cross marking the beginning of the legend followed by the letters "E and "A," while on the reverse one can make out the letters "D" and "E" which begin the name of the man who made it for the English king. For a numismatist, though, these slight clues are sufficient for him to be able to say with confidence that the coin is a penny struck somewhere in Southern England for King Edward the Elder (899—924). It probably left the mint just about the year 920, and the name of the moneyer was Deorwald. It may be compared with one of the whole pennies of the same king [Fig. 2, b] where the king's name can be read in full — EADVVEARD REX ("Edward the King") — while on the reverse there appears a name TORHTELM. Torhtelm was a moneyer who is known to have been active in Kent in the early 920's, and the penny was almost certainly struck at Canterbury at the very end of Edward the Elder's reign. Incidentally a coin from the same dies turned up c.1928 in a large hoard of Anglo-Saxon pennies concealed exactly one thousand years earlier on the site of the Wireless Station at the Vatican.

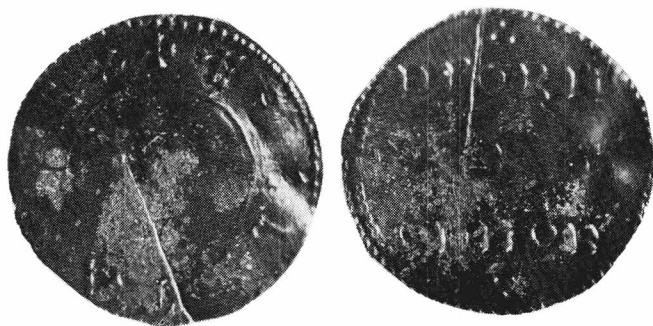


Fig. 3

The third of the English coins is a penny of King Æthelstan (924—939). As appears in the photograph [Fig. 3] there is a large crack — at some time during the last thousand years somebody must have stepped on it — but the lettering is still beautifully sharp. The obverse legend consists of the king's name — note the use of the Old English barred "D" for our "TH" — and on the reverse appears the personal name DIORMOD belonging to a

moneyer otherwise unknown for the reign. Mr. Christopher Blunt of Ramsbury in England, the acknowledged expert on Æthelstan's coinage, has confirmed that the penny was struck somewhere in Southern England, and quite early in the reign, say in 925 or 926. The condition of the coin suggests that it had not been long in circulation before it was brought to Dunmore Cave and lost, so it begins to look as if our little group of coins had found their way to the Kilkenny neighbourhood towards the end of the 920's, a conclusion that will be found to be more than reinforced by a consideration of the remaining pieces from Northeastern England.

All four of these coins were struck for the Viking colonisers who had only recently established themselves to the north of the Fens and to the east of the Pennines. They were predominantly from Denmark, and over large areas they in fact coexisted side by side with a residual English population. At this juncture they were beginning to go through something of a crisis of allegiance, and many were putting themselves under the protection of the English king. One large fragment of a coin from Dunmore [Fig. 4, a] is from a penny struck at Lincoln in the early 920's. Many of the Danish immigrants had spent much time in raiding France as well as England, and a very



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Fig. 4

French devotion they had acquired was to Saint Martin of Tours. On the obverse of the Dunmore fragment the last five letters of the Saint's name are clearly legible together with a little symbol like an inverted "T," while the rest of the coin was occupied by a picture of a sword and by a contraction of the Latin word for "saint" and the initial letter of his name. On the reverse there is an elaborate cruciform pattern, and one can still read the last six letters of the legend LINCOLLA CIVITA(s) for "Lincoln City." The neophyte Christian Danes appear to have recognised that Christianity was the horse for them to back, and to have seen the expediency of reviving the claim of Lindsay, the area around Lincoln, to have its own bishop. Even before the arrival of the Danes, Lincoln had lost its see to Leicester, while as a result of the Danish conquest the Bishop of Leicester was now a refugee at Dorchester-on-Thames. As things turned out, however, it was to be another century and a half before Lincoln was to win back a regular bishop of its own, and coins like this one are extremely rare. Only five others are known to exist, and in the case of only one of them is there a record of where and when it was found. This is a coin at Copenhagen which was found at Terslev in Eastern Denmark in 1911, and as it happens it is from the same dies as the fragment from Dunmore Cave.

The third of the whole coins in the new find is a penny struck for the Danes of York in the early 920's. At this time York was ruled by Norse kings who had come from Dublin, first by a Regnald and after 921 by a certain Sihtric nicknamed "One-Eye." By now most of the Danes have become Christians, but most of the Norse were still pagan. The obverse of this coin [Fig. 4, b] has the name of St. Peter in Latin preceded by a contraction for "saint" and followed by the first two letters of the Latin word for money, so that the whole legend is to be interpreted "Saint Peter's money." Between the two lines of letters is a sword just as on the coin of Lincoln, while on the reverse there is a jumble of meaningless letters around the outline of an object known to archaeologists as a "Thor's hammer," the good-luck symbol of the Viking world and one that was essentially pagan — Thor was the old Scandinavian and Germanic god of war whose name lives on in the English word "Thursday." Here, then, we have an intriguing mixture of Christian and pagan motifs on one and the same coin, and we may refer back to the Saint Martin coin from Lincoln with its little inverted "T," the pagan charm in its simplest form. It is a vivid

reminder of how the Danes of the North of England were still in the process of adapting themselves to Christianity — few as yet of them had been baptised as infants.

We may now look at the first coin to be found in the 1973 investigation, a fragment of a second York penny from the early 920's [Fig. 5, a]. Visible are the letters "T" and "R" from the Latin word PETRI ("Peter's"), and to the right of them the shaft of another Thor's hammer doubles for the "I." On the reverse just legible are the letters "E," "B" and "O" which begin a Latin legend EBORACE CIV(itas) which we may translate "York City" — interestingly the original dedication of York Minster was to Saint Peter. These Petrine pieces are not all that common, but one from the same pair of dies did turn up in a small hoard in Bangor in North Wales in 1894. There seem to have been two successive issues, and it is only the later one that is represented in our find from Dunmore Cave. If the find-spots are plotted on a map, there is a significant concentration in Eastern Ireland and Northern

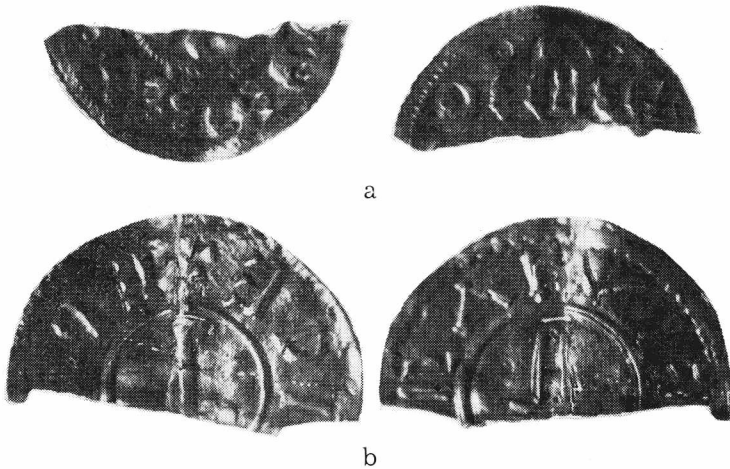


Fig. 5

England on what we may call the Dublin-York axis, a phenomenon that we have already observed in the case of the Kufic coins found in these islands. Most of the finds, too, belong to the second quarter of the tenth century which is precisely the period when the Norse Kings of Dublin were trying to establish themselves as Kings of York as well. Finally from Dunmore Cave there is a fragment of a third penny of the York Vikings [Fig. 5, b].

On the obverse it is just possible to make out the blade of a sword, this time vertical and confined to the middle of the coin, and around it the letters of a meaningless legend. The reverse is similar except that a Thor's hammer in its simplest "T"-like form takes the place of the sword. Pennies like this are extremely rare — this is only the fifth to have been recorded — and it is still problematical whether they are to be dated just before or just after the year 920.

What is very clear is that the coins and fragments of silver found in a dip in the floor of one of the deepest galleries of Dunmore Cave all hang together, and already it is beginning to look very much as if they had been brought there and lost on one occasion towards the end of the 920's. Precisely at this period the Vikings dominated the trade of Northern Europe, and we have seen how the Kufic coins had come across Russia and Scandinavia and how coins from the same dies as three of the Dunmore Cave pieces have been found at places as far afield as Bangor in North Wales, Terslev in Denmark and Rome. It is no less instructive to plot on a map the different finds of coins which we may suppose to have been concealed in these islands after 899 and before 946, and to employ different symbols for each chronological phase. The emphasis is on Leinster and Northern England, and within Ireland there is as the years go by a distinct shift southwards. In part this reflects the consolidation of O'Neill power north of the Boyne that is epitomised in the spectacular if meteoric career of Moriarty of the Leather Cloaks in the early 940's, but also illustrated is the fatal decision of the Dublin Vikings after 915 to attempt a war of conquest on two fronts simultaneously, in South Leinster and Munster as well as in Northern England. For such commitments the Dubliners simply had not got the necessary reserves of manpower, and by the second half of the tenth century they had been bundled out of England, while in Ireland their initial overthrow of the decadent Eoghenacht dynasty of Cashel merely served to clear the way for the eventual rise to an All Ireland kingship of Brian Boramha. Just about the year 930, however, the position was that the Norse of Dublin had been temporarily expelled from York but were advancing steadily into South Leinster which is of course precisely the area where the Dunmore Cave coins were found.

In the 1840's John O'Donovan brought out his definitive edition of the so-called *Annals of the Four Masters*, that magnificent early seventeenth century distillation of what

still remained of the Irish historical tradition on the eve of the final overthrow of the Gaelic order. The annal for 927 records an attack by the Dublin Vikings on a certain "Cave of the Alders," and in a footnote O'Donovan observed that the exact date is open to dispute. The translation is accompanied by a further footnote which tentatively identifies the "Cave of the Alders" with Dunmore Cave, and this we may observe is a century and more before the finding of the coins. Quoted by the *Annals*, too, is an early verse which dates the attack to 928, and this must be accepted as the earliest plausible year for the attack in question. As it happens, references to Viking forays in Southern Ireland abound at this period, and it was fortunate for Munster that the Norse of Dublin as often as not fell foul of their cousins established at Waterford and Limerick. A generation after O'Donovan, William Hennessy published a text and translation of the so-called *Annals of Ulster*, essentially a fifteenth century compilation but incorporating much contemporary material. The text is a mixture of Latin and Irish where the tenth century is concerned, and Hennessy's Englishing is accompanied by a footnote suggesting that O'Donovan might have been a little premature in identifying the "Cave of the Alders" with Dunmore Cave. These particular annals, incidentally, are our earliest authority for the incident, and they date it to 930. One must be careful not to pre-empt the researches of Mr Charles Doherty of the Department of Early Irish History at University College, Dublin, who has undertaken to review the totality of the evidence, but it is the writer's provisional view that 929 is most likely to be the year when the particular attack occurred.

More critical is the question whether the cave attacked and slighted by Guthfrith and the Dubliners is in fact Dunmore Cave. Here the coin evidence may be thought to come into its own. Four of the seven English coins have proved to be from Northeastern England, three of them actually from York, and it is hard to overlook the coincidence that their bracket is the period c.920—c.925, while Guthfrith had been expelled from York and had returned to Dublin in 927. The great O'Donovan held for a time a largely honorific appointment at the Queen's University of Belfast, and the present writer is proud to have re-introduced there the teaching of mediaeval Irish history. Readers may perhaps gather from this why it has given the writer such personal satisfaction and pleasure to have been charged with the publication of this little group of coins which seems so convincingly to vindicate

O'Donovan's inspired suggestion that the "Cave of the Alders" overrun in 929 should be identified with Dunmore Cave.

How exactly did the coins come to be lost? At one time the writer was inclined to think that they had merely slipped out unnoticed from the armpit of one of the Vikings as he brought down his axe on one of the refugees cowering helplessly at his feet — in an age before pockets it seems to have been quite a normal way of carrying small quantities of coin to wrap them in a little screw of cloth and affix it with beeswax to the hair of the armpit. Inspection of the caves with only a small electric torch, however, has suggested the possibility that the trapped Irish may not have allowed it to be quite such a walkover for the Dubliners. Twentieth-century Ireland, after all, has seen Irish boys — and girls — take on armoured vehicles with stones and bottles, and those who have been down Dunmore Cave will have little difficulty in envisaging incidents in which the odd Viking may have become separated from his fellows in the eerie darkness and been done to death. Only when the butchers regained the surface might such losses have been remarked, and by then few might have cared to go back into the Stygian darkness to try to identify by the flickering light of a tallow-dip or pine-knot an individual corpse dragged out from under the heaps of the dying and the dead. This could be thought, though, mere speculation. What remains a solid addition to our knowledge of Viking-age Ireland is that in July and August, Drs. Drew and Huddart were fortunate enough to recover from the floor of Dunmore Cave a scatter of coins of the late ninth and early tenth centuries. The purpose of the present note has been to suggest that they are in a very real sense a new strand in the tangled web of our island's history, and it is hoped that it will have demonstrated at the same time that numismatics is a meaningful if ancillary historical discipline which rises above mere coin collecting.

OLD KILKENNY REVIEW

Articles and notes of Kilkenny interest are always welcome for the Review. All material should be submitted before the end of September each year.

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