

Sheehan, J., Gold in Viking Age Ireland: display and economy

While some gold, in small quantities, was used in early medieval Ireland it was not until the Viking Age that significant amounts of this metal appear. This presentation surveys the evidence for the availability and use of gold objects of Scandinavian character in Viking Age Ireland. It focuses on the ninth and tenth centuries, a period when the bullion and coinage in circulation was predominantly in silver. While the focus is on Ireland, which has produced more gold, the relevant finds from Britain are also taken into account in order to present the wider Irish Sea context.

Most of the material under consideration comprises arm-rings, finger-rings and ingots, and both hoards and single-finds are considered. The occurrence of hack-gold and gold ingots is explored within the context of the role of gold bullion as a means of exchange in the metal-weight economy, while the occurrence of whole gold ornaments, particularly in arm-ring form, is considered within the setting of the social or display economy. The idea of gold ornaments fulfilling a dual and overlapping role within these economies is examined, as is the opposing notion that gold had more of a prestige role than an economic one.

The cultural contexts of the find-spots are explored. Though some items come from Hiberno-Scandinavian contexts, such as Dublin, a significant number are found on Irish settlements, including royal sites and important ecclesiastical sites. In general terms, material derived from Hiberno-Scandinavian contexts tends to be of a form suited for use in a metal-weight economy, such as ingots and hack-gold. On the other hand, material from Irish contexts is more likely to belong in a display economy; the classic example of the latter type is the Hare Island hoard, by far the largest gold hoard on record from across the Viking world, with its ten arm-rings. It seems, therefore, that the evidence from Ireland supports the perception of gold playing a key role within the Viking-age social economies while also playing a part in the bullion economy.