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Silver and social change in the Viking Age

One of the hallmarks of the Viking Age is the great influx of bullion, primarily silver, which shows up as thousands of hoards deposited all over Scandinavia. Traditionally the greatly increased quantity of silver in circulation is seen as a symptom of vastly intensified economic activity, an outcome both of raiding and far-flung trade networks. Both coin and hack-silver are seen essentially as money, a medium of exchange useful in any kind of goods transaction. With reference to the anthropological theory of spheres of exchange in this paper I will argue that outside merchant circles – outside the towns in effect – silver had a much more limited range of uses and, that in the hands of ordinary people, it really could only be used in three kinds of transactions: in compensation for killings, to pay for poetry and – possibly – to intercede in the other world. This, however, was a major development, significantly extending the group that was able to act independently in the public sphere. Essentially, greater access to silver gave more people agency; a greater capacity to initiate conflict and the means to protect themselves. Traditional power structures will have been undermined when significant numbers of people no longer had to rely on a householder or chieftain to look after their interests and safety. This provides insights into the social relations that underpinned Viking expeditions, and throws light on the incentive of kings to control the circulation of silver through minting and to insert themselves as plaintiffs in cases of homicide and other interpersonal violence. It provides a causal link between the aims of Viking expeditions and the socio-political changes that transformed Scandinavian societies in the Viking Age.

This hypothesis has repercussions for our ideas about social relations and political structures before the Viking Age and about the drivers of change that produced the Viking Age itself. Rooting the analysis in individual agency helps us appreciate the motivations that produced the changes that make the Viking Age stand out as a period of transformation.