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Title: Standardization in the Viking Age – Perceptions of power, value and monetary formats

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The development of standards – i.e. standardization – has been part of human nature since before we could arguably understand the concept of standardization. Indeed, it is a concept so primal that it is impossible to trace its origins, in time or space. At its most basic, standardization encompasses the process of systematically making objects, activities, and ideas the same. By definition, standardization is a process by which phenomena are necessarily essentialized and simplified in culturally relative terms. Its application makes things easier to categorize, understand and accurately replicate. In the Viking Age, the process of producing coinage and a monetary standard became such a fundamental principle that we rarely give it much thought, a trait shared with many other societal aspects. In this paper, I discuss the contexts surrounding how this happened, and present some of the influences and consequences of the standardization of value and formats of value. Furthermore, I illuminate some of their material expressions across the Viking world.

Measures of value are fundamental features of society. Value, wealth, and resources are often measured in monetary terms. In many societies in the past as today, money and monetary means of exchange provide a primary instrument through which social mechanisms function – they are the lifeblood of exchange. But all forms of money are based on relative values which can be measured against each other. One key aspect of such measurement is that it rests upon formulations of recognized, standardized values and trust in these. For the Viking Period, how did such measures operate, how were they understood, and how did people navigate them.

Coinage was first introduced into Viking society in Ribe in the 8th century. It became state-based through the 10th and 11th centuries in Denmark, in Norway in the 11th century and in Sweden in the 12th. During this span, the adoption, creation and management of standards were important for the administration of people, communities and larger administrative bodies because establishing a trust in the value of the currency was crucial to the success and

expansion of exchange. Thus, every coin issued carried considerations of its size, weight, fineness, design, legends and fabric, whether consciously decided upon or not.

While the output of Viking Age coinages would come to vary significantly, in cases hundreds of thousands to millions of coins were produced. Thus, their effective standardization, and recognition of it, were imperative. For pre-literate Viking society, as elsewhere, coinage became not only a vehicle for measuring value, but also a powerful and effective device for communicating political authority – in standardized formats. Management of standards was critical, and this paper illuminates how this played out.