

## CASE FOR SUPPORT – UNWRAPPING THE GALLOWAY HOARD

### Research Questions or Problems

Hoarding - the deliberate collection and burial of objects often made from precious metal - is a well-known phenomenon, primarily studied as buried wealth and popularly conceived as 'treasure'. Associated with periods of social unease, such as the end of the Roman Empire and the Viking raids of Early Medieval Britain and Ireland, hoards are often understood as valuable resources buried for security, although this position has been recently challenged (Bland 2015). Usually only inorganic artefacts survive.

The aim of the "Unwrapping the Galloway Hoard" project is to challenge current understanding of the *process* of hoarding through an interdisciplinary study of one of the best-preserved hoards found in Britain to date that, unusually, contains both organic and inorganic artefacts, and stratigraphic evidence of accumulation with separate bundles and caches. To do this we combine methods from digital imaging, artefact analysis, archaeological science and social theory.

Buried around AD 900, and discovered in 2014 near Kirkcudbright, Dumfries and Galloway, the Galloway hoard is the richest, most varied and well-preserved collection of precious and exotic objects hoarded together in Viking-age Britain and Ireland. This recent find has unrealised potential to challenge current understanding of what constitutes a hoard in Early Medieval Europe and beyond. In addition to containing silver and gold, the Galloway hoard is unique due to the outstanding preservation of textiles and leather that wrap the objects, creating multiple caches and bundles within the hoard (for illustrations see visual summary). While the bulk of the hoard contains silver items recognised as forms of bullion, the presence of unusual objects of glass, mineral, rock crystal and curated earthen balls do not fit traditional concepts of Viking-age wealth. A preliminary radiocarbon date (AD 670-780) of one of the textiles covering the lidded silver-gilt vessel is at least a century earlier than the silver bullion in the hoard (c.AD 900). Wear on the surface of the glass beads suggests they were old before they were packed into the vessel.

The Galloway hoard was buried in four distinct caches: a textile-wrapped lidded vessel containing multiple textile-wrapped objects; silver bullion within a leather wrapping; three gold objects in a small wooden box tucked in a cluster of silver arm-rings; and a stratigraphically separate, upper cache of silver arm-rings and ingots accompanied by a Christian pectoral cross. This accumulation of artefacts is rare evidence for objects being placed in multiple distinct bundles and caches before they were assembled into the hoard deposit. Accumulated over many years, with objects originating from near and far, connecting Europe and Asia, and exceptionally preserved with its original textile and leather wrappings, the Galloway hoard provides a unique source of evidence to ask: **How, and why, did people assemble and collect objects before burying them, and how does the Galloway hoard change our understanding of hoarding during the Viking Age?**

The significance of the Galloway hoard extends beyond the Viking Age because of its exceptional preservation, this opens up a range of additional questions that can be asked of this assemblage: What were the objects used for before they were hoarded and why do they become buried together as a hoard? Who might have owned these objects and why were they so valued? For how long were the objects being collected, and from how near or far? What was the significance of old and new objects in the hoard? Why this combination of materials and objects? How were they wrapped and what is the significance of these structured bundles of objects? Through asking these questions, and examining the process of assembling and collecting, we get beyond the usual interpretation of a hoard as a mass of objects. Instead, we are able to question how, and why, people amassed curated objects, such as those of the Galloway hoard, in the first place.

### Research Context

Hoarding in the Viking Age is associated primarily with silver as bullion or currency. So much so, that these centuries have been referred to as 'the Silver Age' (Graham-Campbell & Williams 2007).

Buried around AD900, the Galloway hoard is at an important chronological and geographical juncture. To the north, historical sources first mention the Gaelic-speaking kingdom of Alba (the precursor to the Medieval Kingdom of Scotland) and to the south, the emerging kingdom of England was expanding out from the Wessex heartland. Between these polities the dynasties of Scandinavian origin driven out from Dublin circa AD903 and established in York have been linked to the deposition of comparable silver hoards around the Irish Sea littoral (Graham-Campbell 2011, 155). In Britain and Ireland, the Viking Age (9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries AD) is perceived as a dramatic period of social change brought about by newly established contacts with Scandinavia, bringing seaborne raids, trade in exotic and valuable goods, all within a context of migration and colonisation. An influx of silver reaches Britain and Ireland through the opening up of the northern sea-routes, stimulating new mechanisms of trade and exchange stretching as far as the near east and the Islamic caliphate. In the orthodox view, the circulation of silver forms the basis of Viking-age commerce and economies, with hoards of precious metal buried for safe-keeping with the intention of being reclaimed. However, this emphasis on silver and the economy causes us to lose sight of other exclusive materials and objects that circulated over long distances were collected for various reasons, or which do not usually survive in the archaeological record.

The durability of metal objects in hoards as treasure, scrap, bullion or currency is largely dictated by *taphonomy* (the effects of burial through both human and natural action). These processes of decay and differential preservation play a crucial role in hoard interpretation because perishable material rarely survives. Hoarding has the potential to reveal much about the process of collecting and assembling objects, but even well-considered hoards, such as the Staffordshire Anglo-Saxon hoard (7<sup>th</sup> century AD), are limited by the survival only of metal or other non-perishable objects. Intricate wrappings of textiles, leather and braids, and the remains of a wooden box are objects in the Galloway hoard that do not normally survive. This remarkable preservation provides a wealth of information about internal structure and accumulation. The containers and wrappings create distinct bundles whereby objects are placed in marked relationships to one another. By connecting certain objects and separating others, bundles have an integrity which establishes relationships within and between object groups in this hoard that would otherwise be lost through taphonomic processes. The parcels, bundles and perishable materials in this hoard allow us to explore much more than the final deposit and look in detail at the biography and accumulation of this assemblage (Joy 2016; Zedeño 2008).

Hoarders are visible in the present precisely because they were buried and not retrieved, yet only in instances like the Galloway hoard can we access the long lives of objects and circumstances of accumulation before final deposition. Although there is a large silver bullion component, there are numerous other materials within the hoard which draw attention to other concepts of value (through age, origin, previous ownership, inheritance, sacredness etc.- Kershaw et al 2019). The lidded silver-gilt vessel was itself wrapped with three types of textile (silk, linen, wool) and is remarkable both for the range of unusual or rare organic and inorganic objects contained within. This includes a large collection of Anglo-Saxon metalwork, well-worn glass beads and pendants strung on cord and wrapped, minerals and earth, linen and silk textiles (as cloth and braid) with one complex bundle of silk braids mounted with three golden jewels, and a small rock crystal jar possibly still containing liquid residue. Made in the Byzantine Empire or further east, silks in western Europe were the preserve of the wealthy, especially ecclesiastics (Vedeler 2014). The inclusion of diverse, exotic and unusual materials within the hoard and the practice of wrapping bear more resemblance to heirlooms, or textile-wrapped saint's relics, rather than traditional concepts of material wealth (Hardt 2013).

Individually, and in totality, the unique composition and cumulative potency of bringing the Galloway hoard together provides an unprecedented opportunity to re-examine why, and how, people amassed, curated and buried objects. Through focussing on the process of assembling and collecting this "Unwrapping the Galloway Hoard" project will provide numerous gateways into the wider Viking-age world.

## Essential References

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