

Small doors on the Viking age: The Anglo-Saxon coins in Norway project

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Dr Elina Screen here discusses her work on the 'Anglo-Saxon Coins in Norway' project – a collaboration between the British Academy's *Sylloge of Coins of the British Isles (SCBI)* research project and the Norwegian partner museums. Her research has led to two illustrated catalogues in the *SCBI* series on *Norwegian Collections* (Part I published in September 2013, Part II to be published in autumn 2014) – further information can be found via www.britishacademy.ac.uk/pubs/

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In 1866, Gabriel Olson Sletheid, a Norwegian farmer from Slethei in the region of Rogaland, discovered a hoard of about 340 silver coins from the Viking age under a stone on his farm. Finds of antiquities had long been reported and recorded in 19th-century Norway, and thus the Slethei hoard, as it is known today, also came to the attention of the authorities. Claudius Jacob Schive (Figure 1) – a toll inspector by profession, and enthusiastic student of coins – undertook to catalogue the find, which proved mostly to contain Anglo-Saxon coins of King Æthelred II (978-1016). Schive's work was complicated by the state of the coins, many of which had oxidised in their time in the ground and broken into very small fragments, but in 1869 he was able to publish a list of 179 coins and 113 larger fragments, and the 1,000 or so tiny fragments he could not identify were put neatly to one side for future numismatists to tackle.

I first encountered the Slethei hoard and Claudius Jacob Schive in 2004-5, when I started to catalogue all the Anglo-Saxon and later British coins in Norway up to 1272 for the longstanding British Academy publication series, the *Sylloge of Coins of the British Isles* ('sylloge' in this context means an illustrated catalogue). I visited museums in Oslo, Trondheim, Bergen and Stavanger to catalogue and photograph all the British and Anglo-Saxon coins in their collections, and research all the individual hoards, finds and donations that had built up each collection. Chronologically, the coins range from



Figure 1
Claudius Jacob Schive. The portrait was painted for the Oslo University Coin Cabinet in the 1920s, and hangs today in the Museum of Cultural History, Oslo.

two Iron-Age Celtic coins to 65 English *Long Cross* coins struck in the period 1247-72. But it is the Anglo-Saxon coins that came to Norway during the Viking age that dominate the catalogue – above all coins of Æthelred II and his Danish successor Cnut the Great (1016-35), which together make up 80 per cent of all the coins in the Norwegian collections up to 1272. Some 4,230 coins and rather more years later than anticipated, the two-volume catalogue of the Norwegian collections is complete, and it is a good moment to take stock. Why is it so important to publish fully illustrated catalogues of coins like this? What do we learn from the coins and this project?

In many ways, the Slethei hoard epitomises the 'Anglo-Saxon coins in Norway' project for me, because it shows how much potential Anglo-Saxon coins have as sources

for understanding Anglo-Saxon England and Norway in the Viking age, and reveals the questions that remain to be answered. It also opens up the history of museums and collecting – and the individuals who played a key part in publishing and preserving the material along the way. Other numismatists had helpfully tackled many of the Slethei fragments in the intervening century or so. But at a personal level, the moment when the well-ordered trays of Slethei coins came to a halt, and instead I was confronted by the daunting challenge of a plastic box containing 400 or so unsorted minute fragments, stands out for me – together with the excitement of discovering another tiny box, containing a unique Anglo-Saxon coin from the hoard, complete with Schive's original ticket describing the coin and identifying it as unparalleled (Figure 2).

Kings and coins in Anglo-Saxon England

Æthelred II 'the Unready' is better known for his failures than his successes as king.¹ His reign certainly saw repeated U-turns, as once-favoured groups of nobles were ousted from court. As England came under intensifying Viking attack from the 990s, Æthelred faced disloyalty among the elite, apparently exacerbated by his poor handling of key figures – including his son, Edmund Ironside. His contemporary nickname, *unræd*, plays on the meaning of the name Æthelred, 'noble counsel': *Æthelræd Unræd* might be translated as 'good advice the ill-advised'. However, Æthelred II's coinage is one of the great success stories of his reign, and a key plank in current arguments for the strength of late Anglo-Saxon England's government compared with its French and German counterparts. At approximately six-year intervals, new coin types were introduced, and the old coins were successfully recalled. Coin users paid for the privilege of converting their old coins into the current type, with the king receiving the fee. English coin hoards, which are typically dominated by coins of the current type, reveal the effectiveness of royal control over coinage and its use.

The unique coin in the Slethei hoard, probably made as Æthelred's final coin type was being introduced in around 1009, gives us a fascinating glimpse into the introduction and design process of a new coin type. It has the standard reverse design of the new *Small Cross* type (the name refers to the style of cross on the reverse), coupled with an exceptional portrait of the king (Figure 2).

Although the portraits on Æthelred's coins look simply drawn to our eyes, the images in fact take inspiration from Roman coin types. For example, the *Small Cross* type normally shows Æthelred wearing a Roman-style diadem, with ties at the back of the head (Figure 3b), and the ornamentation of the helmet on Æthelred's *Helmet* coin type from c. 1004-9 draws on the spiky crown seen on Roman antoniniani (Figure 3a). On the Slethei coin,

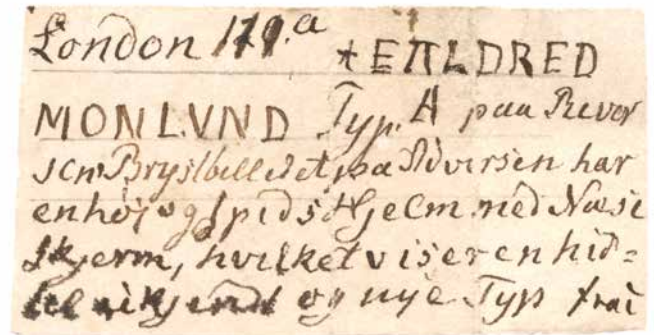


Figure 2
The unique coin of Æthelred II found in the Slethei hoard, portraying the king in a pointed helmet. It is accompanied by C.I. Schive's original coin ticket describing the 'tall pointed helmet' and concluding that this is a 'new type'. (Not to scale: the coin is 18 mm across.)

Figure 3
Two coins of Æthelred II from the Slethei hoard.



a. A coin of Æthelred's *Helmet* type, struck c. 1004-9 at Ilchester; the shape and ornamentation of the helmet is inspired by Roman coins.



b. A coin of Æthelred's *Last Small Cross* type, struck c. 1009-16 at London. (SCBI 65, nos. 927 and 1347. Not to scale: the coins are 18 mm across.)

1. Two readable biographies of Æthelred II: Ann Williams, *Æthelred the Unready: The Ill-Counselled King* (2003); Ryan Lavelle, *Æthelred II: King of the English 978-1016* (2002).



Figure 4
Agnus Dei penny of Æthelred II, from the Nesbø hoard, Norway. One of only 21 known coins of this type, struck c. 1009. (Not to scale: the coin is 19 mm across.)

however, we see Æthelred portrayed wearing a pointed helmet, a much more military look, accurately reflecting the contemporary shape of helmets, rather than following Roman inspiration as usual. With just this sole survivor, we do not know how extensive Æthelred's trial coinage with this much more active, military portrait actually was, and the coin raises important questions about how each coin type was designed and issued. Today we are used to special coin types, such as the Olympic and other commemorative 50 pence coins, which circulate alongside our normal currency. Was this coin, together with another very special coinage from c. 1009, the *Agnus Dei* pennies with their religious symbolism (Figure 4), intended to circulate alongside the main coin type, to deliver twin messages of military intent and Christian intercession, in the face of Viking attacks? Or is this simply an experiment or sample, never issued widely, possibly because Æthelred decided he disliked the message sent by the helmet? The Slethei coin shows that, even in the much-studied Anglo-Saxon coinage, fascinating questions remain to be answered about kings and the currency.

The systematic publication of all the surviving Anglo-Saxon coins – the aim of the *Sylloge of Coins of the British Isles* – not only makes unusual coins like this accessible, but also puts on record all the normal and ordinary coins: all 301 of them in the case of the Slethei hoard, from 36 different mints, ranging in size from the largest mints of London, Winchester and York, down to minor operations such as those at Castle Gotha, Warminster and Watchet. From the perspective of understanding the place of the coinage in Anglo-Saxon society and the economy, these typical coins are enormously valuable. Each moneyer signed his name and mint on the reverse of his coins. All the coins were struck from hand-engraved dies, leading to subtle or not-so-subtle differences in the portrait of the king, the reverse design, and the layout of the lettering on the different dies, even those used by the same moneyer at the same mint. Publishing the pictures of every coin allows the individual dies used by each moneyer at each mint to be identified and counted, and thus gives us an indication of the size of the coinage. The larger our sample of illustrated coins, the better the deductions we can make about the size and availability of the coinage – questions over which much ink has been spilt. Volume by volume, therefore, the *Sylloge of Coins of the British Isles* is adding to our data and improving the

prospects of offering better answers to these questions over time.

Trade, raid or tribute?

The catalogue of the Norwegian collections is also the starting point for finding out more about Viking-age Norway and its links with Anglo-Saxon England. No single coin can tell us very much about these ties, but cumulatively a large body of material starts to reveal trends and patterns. As part of the process of cataloguing the coins, I produced an updated list of all the Norwegian finds containing Anglo-Saxon coins, drawing on the excellent study of Norway's Viking-age coinages written by Kolbjørn Skaare in 1976.² The finds hint at long-standing trading contacts, especially with northeast England, which started before the Viking age: the earliest Anglo-Saxon coin found in Norway was struck in Northumbria (737-58) and found at Ervik, on the coast in Sogn og Fjordane. Given the extent of Viking activity in the British Isles from 793, there are surprisingly few coins from c. 800-960, and the few known finds again include a significant Northumbrian contingent, such as a rare *Sword St Peter* penny struck by the Viking rulers of York, c. 921-7. Norwegians undoubtedly took a full part in the Viking age as raiders, settlers and traders – but the mysterious lack of coin finds suggests that at this time they spent any Anglo-Saxon coins they acquired abroad, or rapidly melted them down on their return home.

The picture changes significantly around 980, when the successes of raiders in the Second Viking Age are reflected in an influx of Anglo-Saxon coins into Norway. Trade with Germany also flourished (supplemented by occasional raiding), and the number of German coins in the finds rises at this time, too. Tribute-taking also contributed to the haul. For example, Olaf Tryggvason successfully extracted £22,000 from Æthelred in 994 – one of the infamous Danegelds – and used the money to establish himself as king of Norway (995-1000). Unlike Anglo-Saxon England, there was no 'national' coin type dominating the currency in Norway until the reign of Harald Hardrada (1047-66). The Norwegian Viking-age hoards thus reflect the wide mixture of coins in circulation. They typically include Anglo-Saxon and German coins in roughly even proportions, with smaller numbers of other coin types, including Scandinavian imitative coins, Islamic coins, and occasionally coins from elsewhere – for example, from Bohemia, Byzantium, Normandy, and even a solitary Russian coin.

Against this background, the Slethei hoard stands out for its unusual contents, with 301 Anglo-Saxon coins, and just 16 German coins instead of the 100 or more we might expect. The hoard also included 19 imitations of Anglo-Saxon coins produced in Dublin and Scandinavia, and two Danish coins. The latest coin in the hoard was a Danish penny struck in 1018-35, indicating that the hoard was hidden after 1018. All the Anglo-Saxon coins were from Æthelred II's reign, but coins of one type

2. Kolbjørn Skaare, *Coins and Coinage in Viking Age Norway* (Oslo, 1976) remains the best detailed study of the Viking age coins.

dominate the hoard to an unusual extent, with 221 coins of Æthelred's *Last Small Cross* type (made c. 1009-16) present (Figure 3b). We seem to have here a large group of *Last Small Cross* coins that had arrived from Anglo-Saxon England recently, and not yet become mixed into the general currency of Rogaland. Furthermore, many of the newest Anglo-Saxon coins are struck from the same dies, implying that they had not circulated long in England, either, but come fairly directly from the mint. In turn, this hints that the Slethei hoard may represent the gains of a Norwegian who had participated in the great campaigns of the end of Æthelred's reign.

Contacts continued under Cnut, Æthelred's Danish successor as king of England (1016-35). In addition to many coins of Æthelred, there are large numbers of coins of Cnut in the two largest Norwegian Viking age hoards. The Årstad hoard of c. 1,850 coins was found in 1836 (also in the Rogaland region), and included 1,004 Anglo-Saxon coins, 824 of them from Cnut's reign. In 1950, a large hoard that included 174 coins of Cnut out of a total of 964 coins, was found in digging in the post office car park in Trondheim (the Dronningens gate 10 hoard). Alongside participation in Cnut's English army, Cnut's takeover of Norway in 1028 (oiled by substantial bribes to the key men of Norway) may also help account for the high numbers of his coins encountered in the Norwegian finds.

Coins, collectors and museums

Researching the individual finds and museum collections of coins also opened unexpected doors on the history of 19th-century Norway. This was the formative period in which most of Norway's museums were founded (or further developed, in the case of the collections of the Trondheim-based Royal Norwegian Society of Sciences and Letters, established in 1760). The enormous interest in Norway's Viking and medieval past, stimulated by Norway's new status as a nation, was an important impetus in these developments. Nineteenth-century Norway was also fortunate in having a succession of eminent scholars who researched and published the hoards discovered in that century, whether academics such as Professor Christian Andreas Holmboe (linguist and keeper of Oslo University's Coin Cabinet), or collectors and scholars such as Schive. While their international counterparts tended to a pragmatic approach, and often melted down unwanted coins to purchase more interesting specimens, it is striking that the Norwegian museums



Figure 5

Fragments from the Årstad hoard, ranging in size from 1 mm to 10 mm across. The Slethei fragments are very similar, though on the whole towards the smaller end of the scale!

hung on to the fragmentary coins from hoards such as Slethei and Årstad, long before this became standard good practice (Figure 5). Though processing so many very small fragments was challenging, their existence was also testimony to the good care the Norwegian coin collections have received over the years.

Producing the catalogue has been a long but stimulating journey, made possible by the many curators who welcomed me into their museums so warmly, introduced me to their collections, and patiently answered queries on everything from coin provenances to travel in Norway.³ Personally, the process has provided unexpected side-lights on the history of Norwegian museums, given me a whole-hearted appreciation of the endeavours of the many eminent scholars in whose footsteps I trod, and opened up new questions to explore on Viking-age Norway and England. Thanks to the British Academy's support for the project, the catalogue will now open more doors on to the Viking age for others too.

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3. The coins in the Norwegian museum collections are gradually being made available on the Norwegian museums' database MUSIT: www.unimus.no/numismatikk/#/L=en (search for SCBI* to bring up all the coins published in SCBI volumes 65 and 66, *Norwegian Collections* Parts I and II). More information about the SCBI project can be found on its website: www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/dept/coins/projects/scbi/