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The Rathmooley Hoard and other Viking Age silver from Co. Tipperary

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Introduction

In the Autumn of 1925 an important archaeological discovery was made in a ringfort at Rathmooley, a short distance west of Killenaule, Co. Tipperary. The finder¹ noticed two silver armrings lying together amongst spoil which had been eroded from one of the banks of this large multivallate site.²

These objects, which are Viking-age in date, subsequently passed into the possession of the Scott-O'Connell family, one of whom published a brief note on the discovery some years later.³ The hoard has recently been acquired by the National Museum of Ireland.

The purpose of this paper is to describe and discuss the two Rathmooley armrings. It will be suggested that one is of Scandinavian manufacture, while the other is a product of the Hiberno-Viking silverworking tradition. Other finds of Viking-age silver from county Tipperary are briefly noted.

Viking Age Silver Finds from Co. Tipperary

There are at present three known hoards and one single-find of Scandinavian and Hiberno-Viking silver from co. Tipperary. The single-find comprises an armring fragment which recently came to light at Irishlounaght, near Marlfield (Clonmel),⁴ while the hoards apart from that from Rathmooley consist of a lost 18th-century find of armrings from near Cullen,⁵ and a mid-19th-century discovery of coins provenanced only to within county Tipperary.⁶

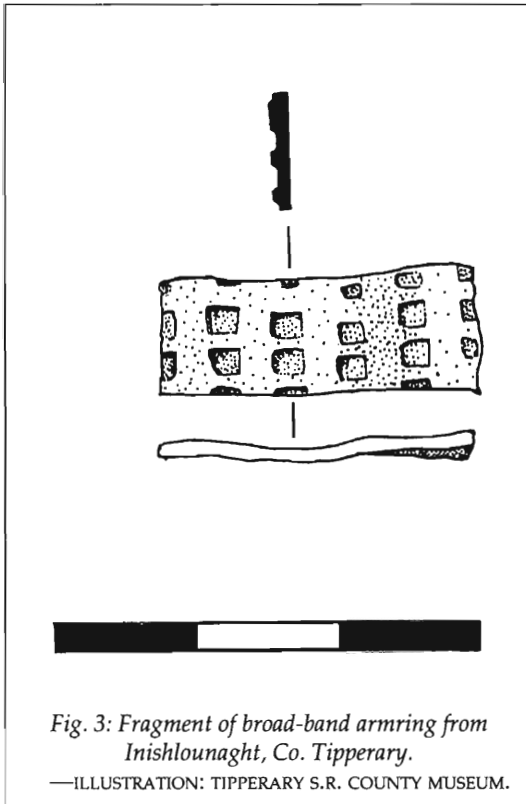
The Co. Tipperary coin-hoard was discovered around 1843, and it has been suggested that its provenance lay in the south-western portion of the county.⁷ It consisted of 19 coins of Viking and Anglo-Saxon type, the forms of which suggest that the hoard was assembled c. 942.⁸

This date, and the fact that the coins are representative of the money current among the Hiberno-Norse of Dublin at this time, led Dolley to suggest that the hoard originated as portion of the tribute exacted from the inhabitants of Dublin by the army of Muirchertach (the Irish high king designate) before the latter's hostage-taking circuit led him southwestwards to Cashel in 942.⁹ If this interesting theory is accepted, the co. Tipperary hoard must consequently be regarded merely as Irish wealth acquired as booty and not as an indicator of Scandinavian trading or settlement in the area.



Figs. 1 & 2: The Rathmooley, Co. Tipperary, hoard.

— COPYRIGHT NATIONAL MUSEUM OF IRELAND.



Little is on record concerning the silver hoard of armrings which was discovered in a bog close to Cullen some time during the 18th-century. The evidence for it is contained in Vallancey's early-19th-century account of the Hare Island, co. Westmeath, Viking-age hoards, in which he parallels the silver armrings from the midland findspot with ones "of the Fame kind" which were "dug up, some years ago, in the bog of Cullen, in the county of Tipperary, and were in the possession of the Rev. Mr. Armstrong of Tipperary".¹⁰

The Rev. Mr. Armstrong referred to here is almost certainly the Rev. John Armstrong, M.A., of Tipperary town, a contemporary of Vallancey's, who was described in 1777 as "a gentleman curious in the antiquities of his county, and furnished with one of the best libraries in the kingdom . . . In Mr. Armstrong's library I have found entertainment, not only from the books, but from some antique curiosities, found in the neighbouring bogs; and from a catalogue of others not now in his possession".¹¹

The armrings from the Hare Island silver hoard which Vallancey states to be of the same type as those in the Cullen find have been identified as being of the Hiberno-Viking broad-band type.¹²

Unfortunately no information regarding the size or the subsequent fate of this important Tipperary hoard is on record, though it is likely that it was melted down for its bullion value.

The armring fragment which recently came to light in a field adjacent to the monastic site of Inishlounaght, however, derives from a ring of the same type as those which constituted the Cullen hoard. It is ornamented on its outer surface with transversely disposed rows of punched rectilinear motifs (Fig. 3). Armrings of this Hiberno-Viking broad-band type form by far the largest group of Viking-age silver armrings known from Ireland, with over 100 individual examples now on record.¹³

Although such rings are not infrequently encountered within hoards of Scandinavian and British provenance, their overall distribution pattern indicates that most were actually manufactured in Ireland, albeit under Scandinavian stimulus. Their presence in coin-dated hoards, both in Ireland and abroad, suggests that they were produced within the period of the second half of the 9th century and the first half of the 10th century, with their main period of manufacture perhaps dating to between c. 880 and c. 930—40.¹⁴

The Rathmooley Hoard

The Rathmooley hoard is now in the National Museum of Ireland, where the armrings are registered as 1900: 127—128. Ring 1900 127 belongs to a type here termed the rod-armring, while Ring 1900 128 is of a type termed the plain penannular armring. As the rings have not previously been described in detail the following descriptions are offered:

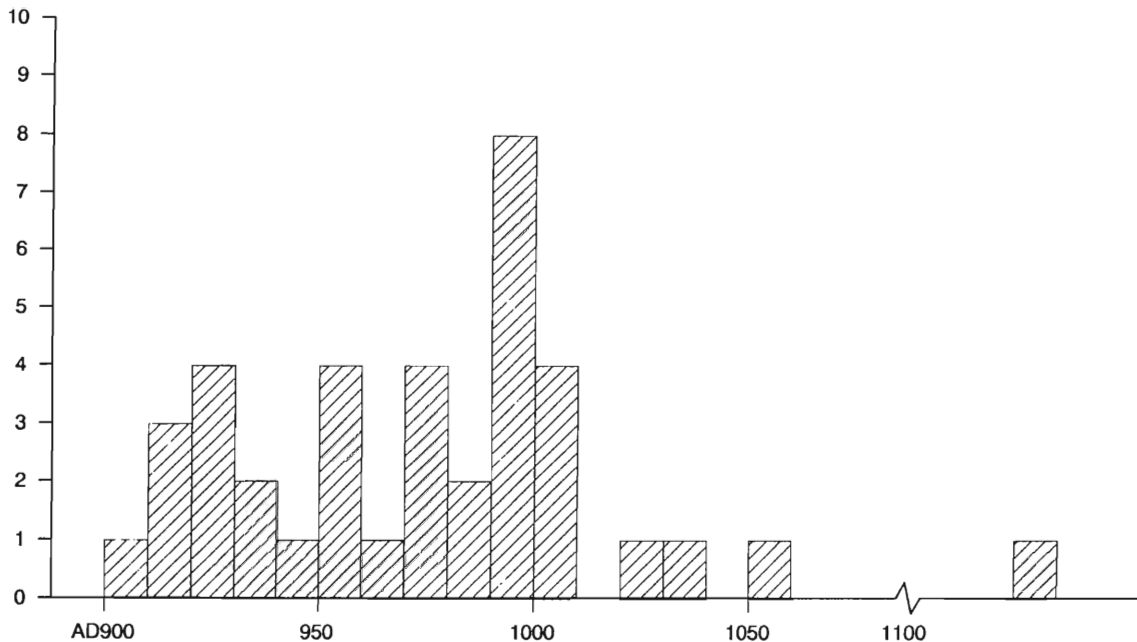


Fig. 5: Bar-chart showing deposition by decades of Viking-age silver mixed hoards containing rod-armrings.

<i>Provenance</i>	<i>T.p.q.</i>
Cuerdale, Lancashire, England	905
Brunnby, Schonen, Sweden	916
Stafsinge, Halland, Sweden	916
Slemmedal, Aust-Agder, Norway	925
Hallayrd, Blekinge, Sweden	936
Suderbys, Dalhem, Gotland	978
Baldringe, Schonen, Sweden	983
Sodra Sandby, Schonen, Sweden	983
Traen, Buskerud, Norway	991
Resolv, Schonen, Sweden	996
Tolanga, Schonen, Sweden	996
Solvesborg, Blekinge, Sweden	997
Ostra Herrestad, Schonen, Sweden	1021
Edestad, Blekinge, Sweden	1056
Osterby, Ekeby, Gotland	1079

Fig. 6: Provisional check-list of Viking-age silver mixed hoards containing rod-armrings with spiral-knot terminals.

—ILLUSTRATION: U.C.C. AUDIO-VISUAL SERVICES.



1990: 127 (Fig. 1)

Annular silver armring of oval form. Complete. It is formed from a rod of circular cross-section which tapers evenly in thickness from its mid-point towards the terminals. The latter are formed into thin strands which are turned outwards and interlocked to form a simple and slightly lopsided spiral device. One end of the rod terminates on the margins of this device; the other is crossed over and wound tightly around the opposite terminal area eight times. In order to balance the effect achieved by this, a separate piece of silver rod is wound around the second terminal area. The armring is in good condition and features no nickings.

The external maximum diameters of the armring are 6.78cm x 5.71cm. The rod has a maximum thickness at the mid-point of the hoop, of 4.46mm. At the terminals this is reduced to an average thickness of 1.4mm. The object weighs 22.46g.

1990: 128 (Fig. 2)

Penannular silver armring bent out of form. Complete. It is formed from a thick rod of circular cross-section which tapers slightly from its mid-point towards the terminals, both of which are blunt-ended and assume slightly expanded form. The ring appears to have been formed by a process of hammering. It was subsequently bent out of form, and its terminals now overlap considerably. Its inner face displays some evidence of nicking.

The external maximum diameters of the object are 5.06cm x 4.55cm. It is estimated that in its original form these would have been c. 6.0cm x c 5.5cm. The rod has a maximum thickness, at the mid-point of the hoop, of 6.94mm. It tapers in thickness to an average of 6mm, at the terminal areas, and the expanded terminals themselves measure 6.62mm and 6.36mm in diameter. The object weighs 52.77g.

Rod-armrings are of common occurrence in the Viking-age hoards of Scandinavia, but are much rarer in the western Viking world. Examples formed with rods of various types of cross-section are on record, but the predominant rod-armring type combines all, or most, of the following characteristics (Fig. 4a-d);¹⁵ it is fabricated from a rod, of circular or approximately circular cross-section, and is annular in form; the rod tapers in thickness towards the terminals which are normally simply wound around the opposite side, although in some cases they are intertwined to form a closing spiral-knot; the ring is normally plain and undecorated, and may occur in gold, though examples in silver are of far more common occurrence.

Silver armrings of this type are on record from at least 35 coin-dated hoards in Scandinavia and from a further two, if not three, in Britain.¹⁶ When tabulated in bar-chart form it may be seen that the deposition dates of these hoards range from the beginning of the 10th to the early decades of the 12th century (Fig. 5). The majority were deposited between 950 and 1,000,¹⁷ with a sizable minority being deposited before 950.

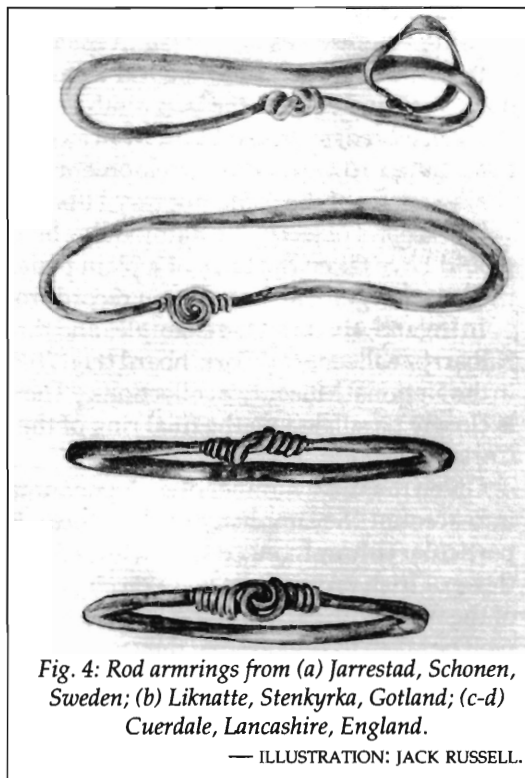


Fig. 4: Rod armrings from (a) Jarrestad, Schonen, Sweden; (b) Liknatte, Stenkyrka, Gotland; (c-d) Cuedale, Lancashire, England.

— ILLUSTRATION: JACK RUSSELL.

When these two groups, divided by the mid-point of the 10th century, are more closely investigated an interesting trend becomes apparent. With one exception, all of the hoards in the later group are provenanced to southern Scandinavia and the Baltic Islands, while the majority of those in the earlier group are of either Norwegian or insular provenance. On this basis it may reasonably be suggested that the rod-armring type is a Norse development, for which the fashion spread to Sweden, Denmark and the Baltic Islands.

It may be furthermore noted that examples of insular provenance are likely to be of Norwegian derivation, and to be pre-950 in date. The presence of spiral-knots on some such rings appears to be of no significant assistance in arriving at a closer chronological sequence for this type, given the occurrence of this feature on rod-armrings from a wide range of coin-dated hoards (Fig. 6).

Only two examples of rod-armrings are on record from Ireland apart from the Rathmooley ring. The first of these is a diminutive and unprovenanced example¹⁸, while the second (now lost) formed a part of the hoard discovered at Macroom Castle, Co. Cork, in the middle of the 19th century.¹⁹ In Britain, however, a number of complete rod-armrings and numerous fragments occur in the Cuerdale (Lancs.) hoard²⁰ (Fig. 4c-d), while a single example forms the non-numismatic element of the recently re-provenanced Deptford (S.E. London) hoard, deposited c. 935.²¹ An example may also have formed part of the now largely destroyed bullion component of the Bossall/Flaxton (Yorks), hoard²², which appears to have been deposited c. 925.²³

The presence of rod-armrings in the Cuerdale find which, on the basis of its large numismatic content, appears to have been deposited c. 905²⁴, is of importance in that it demonstrates the currency of the type amongst the large insular pool of later 9th-century silver. In fact, given that the bulk of the diagnostic non-numismatic components of this hoard are of Hiberno-Viking origin, and that most of it was almost certainly assembled in Ireland,²⁵ it is not unlikely that the Cuerdale rod-armrings themselves originated in Ireland.

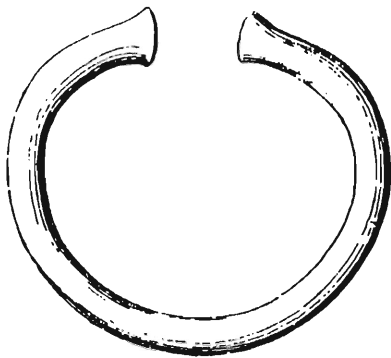
In summary, therefore, the rod-armring in the Rathmooley hoard is probably of Norwegian derivation and dates to the later ninth or first half of the tenth century. Its presence in Ireland during this period is of special interest from an Irish point of view in that rings of this type appear to have contributed towards the development of the Hiberno-Viking coiled-armring, one of the most characteristic of the contemporary Hiberno-Viking armring types.²⁶

The second object in the Rathmooley hoard (Fig. 2) is bent somewhat out of shape, but originally would have taken the form of a plain penannular armring. Although not of common occurrence, rings of this general form are on record from a small number of hoards from Scandinavia.²⁷

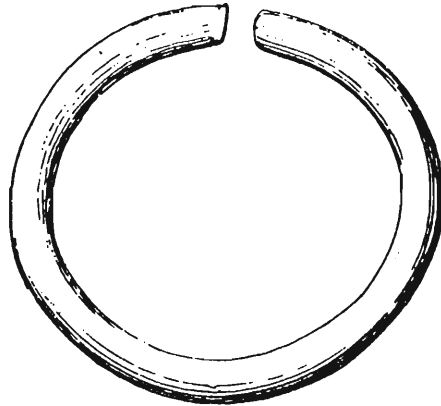
In Ireland, six complete examples and three large fragments appear to have constituted the entire Kilbarry/Killeens, co. Cork, hoard (Fig. 7b)²⁸ while, in addition, an unprovenanced example occurs in the National Museum's collections.²⁹ The slight expansion of the terminals of the Rathmooley ring is closely paralleled on the final ring of the type known from Ireland, that from the Macroom, co. Cork, hoard (Fig. 7a).³⁰

Given the small number of such penannular rings on record from Viking-age hoards, and taking into account the simplicity of their form, it is difficult either to date the type or to assign it to a particular cultural context within the Viking World. Nevertheless, it would not appear unlikely that those of Irish provenance were produced in an Hiberno-Viking milieu. The southerly distribution of the type, with each of the three hoards in which they occur being of Munster provenance, might well be taken to suggest that they were manufactured in one of the Scandinavian settlements of the south coast.

As to the date of the type, the only evidence at present is its hoard-associated material. In the case of the Killeens/Kilbarry hoard there was none; but in both other hoards — those from Rathmooley and Macroom — the only associated objects were rod armrings. It would therefore seem likely that



*found near Macroom
Rev. D. Neligan?*



*found at Killeens
James Geo. F. Wise Esq. Wt. 408 grs.*

Fig. 7: Penannular rings from: (a) Macroom, Co. Cork; (b) Kilbarry / Kileens, Co. Cork. (after Wildele 1851).

simple penannular armrings of this type in Ireland may be dated by association to the late ninth or the first half of the 10th-century.

Finally, the small but interesting hoard from Rathmooley appears to have both a Hiberno-Viking and a Scandinavian element. Its discovery in a ringfort suggests that it was in native Irish ownership when concealed, and it is but one of a significant number of Viking-age silver hoards on record from such contexts. Whether it was acquired through trading relationships or as booty is debatable.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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FOOTNOTES

1. The finder gave an account of his discovery to Mr. Patrick Holland, M.A., Curator, Tipperary (S.R.) County Museum, in 1991.
2. Co. Tipperary S.M.R., No. 54.
3. Scott-O'Connell, D.H.: "Viking Period Silver Ornaments from Rathmooley, County Tipperary," *Journal of the Cork Archaeological and Historical Society* 43 (1938), 125-126.
4. Tipperary (S.R.) County Museum, Registration No. 1984 : 39.
5. Vallancey, C.: *Collectanea De Rebus Hibernicis*, 6, pt.2, Dublin 1804, 256.
6. Dolley, R.H.M.; "The 1843 find of Viking-age silver coins from co. Tipperary", *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society* 57 (1962), 41-47.
7. *Ibid.*, 42.
8. *Ibid.*, 46.

9. *Ibid.*, 47. See also O'Donovan, J.: *Tracts Relating to Ireland etc.*, Dublin 1841, Vol. 1, in which Cormacan's poem describing Muirchertach's circuit is dealt with.
10. See n. 5 above.
11. Campbell, T.; *A Philosophical Survey of the South of Ireland in a series of letters to John Watkinson, M.D.*, London 1777, 142, 156. The catalogue referred to here is probably that supplied by Armstrong to T.G. Pownall which the latter published as an appendix to, "An Account of Some Irish Antiquities", *Archaeologica* 3 (1775), 355-370. It contains a list of antiquities, mainly of gold and bronze, which were discovered in the bog between 1731 and 1773. No mention is made of the silver hoard in this source, which may indicate that it had not yet been discovered. If so, its discovery date lies between 1773 and Armstrong's death in 1781.
12. Graham-Campbell, J.A.: "A Viking Age Gold Hoard From Ireland", *Antiquaries Journal* 54 (1974), 269.
13. Sheehan, J.: *Viking Age Silver Armrings From Ireland*, M.A. thesis, N.U.I. (University College, Galway), 1984.
14. Graham-Campbell, J.A.: "The Viking-age silver hoards of Ireland", in Almqvist, B. and Greene, D. (eds.), *Proceedings of the Seventh Viking Congress, Dublin 1976*, 52; Sheehan, J.: "A Viking-age silver arming from Portumna, Co. Galway", *Journal of Galway Archaeological and Historical Society* 42 (1989-90), 125.
15. This type of arming forms Hardh, B.: *Wikingertzeitliche Depotfunde Aus Sudschweden*, Lund 1976, 56-59, and Stenberger, M.: *Die Schatzfunde Gotlands Der Wikingertzeit*, I, Uppsala 1958, 96-104.
16. A full list of these hoards will be published in Sheehan, J.: "Coiled Armrings: an Hiberno-Viking silver arming type", *Proceedings of R.I.A.*, (forthcoming), Table 4.
17. The deposition of each of the four hoards deposited between 1000 and 1010, as shown on Fig.4, is 1002, and may be therefore taken to reflect a late 10th-century, rather than an early 11th-century currency for the material in them.
18. N.M.I. Reg. No.: p876 (126).
19. See Graham-Campbell, J.A., and Briggs, C.S.: "Some Neglected Viking-Age Silver Hoards from near Athlone and Co. Cork". *Peritia* 5 (1986), 311-312, for the evidence for this hoard. The rod arming was described in 1851 as "ingeniously formed so as to expand readily for the convenience of the wearer; each extremity terminates in a spiral twist, through which the other extremity is passed".
20. Hawkins, E.: "An Account of coins and treasure found in Cuerdale", *Archaeological Journal* 4 (1847), 122.
21. Graham-Campbell, J.A.: "The Re-provenancing of a Viking-Age hoard to the Thames, near Deptford, (S.E. London)", *British Numismatic Journal* 56 (1986), 186-187.
22. Graham-Campbell, J.A.: "A Vital Yorkshire Hoard Revisited", (forthcoming).
23. Blackburn, M. and Pagan, H.: "A revised check-list of coin-hoards from the British Isles, C. 500-1100", in Blackburn, M. (ed.) *Anglo-Saxon Monetary History: essays in memory of Michael Dolley*, Leicester, 1986, 295, No. 108.
24. *Ibid.*, 294, no. 87.
25. Graham-Campbell, J.A.: "Some Archaeological Reflections on the Cuerdale hoard", in Metcalf, D. M. (ed.) *Coinage in Ninth Century Northumbria*, British Archaeological Reports 180, Oxford 1987, 339-340.
26. Sheehan, J.; *op. cit.*
27. For example, the hoards from Barkakra, Schonon, Sweden (Hardh, B., *op. cit.*, 36, fig.22.4) and Gashagen, Visby, Gotland (Stenberger, M., *op. cit.*, 239-41, fig.161). These rings are quite distinct from the variety of Scoto-Norse 'ring-money' which is described as "of circular cross-section with straight cur terminals" in Graham-Campbell, J.A.: "The Viking-Age silver hoards of the Isle of Man", in Fell, G. et al, (ed.), *The Viking Age In the Isle of Man*, London, 1983, 62. The latter invariably taper markedly in thickness towards the terminals.
28. Graham-Campbell, J.A., and Briggs, C.S.: *op. cit.*, 312-13, fig.5.
29. N.M.I. Reg. No.: W.39.
30. Graham-Campbell, J.A. and Briggs, C.S., *op. cit.*, 311-12, fig.3.

