

# Silver as Bridewealth

## An Interpretation of Viking Age Silver Hoards on Gotland, Sweden

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A remarkably large number of Viking Age silver hoards have been found on the island of Gotland in the Baltic Sea. The reasons for this richness of finds have been the subject of much debate. This article presents an interpretation that has not been previously discussed. According to this, silver was a prestige valuable which was transferred as bridewealth. This interpretation is based on the settlement situation on Gotland during the Viking Age and on a hypothesis regarding what kind of policies for land division this situation necessitated.

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About 700 finds of precious metal from the Viking Age have been made on Gotland. These finds contain a total of c. 144.200 silver coins, several thousand silver objects – hack-silver and pieces of jewellery – and a smaller number of gold objects (Östergren 1989:23–24). This means that about 2/3 of all Viking Age silver coins that are known from Sweden have been found on Gotland (Malmer 1983:250).

Almost 400 of the Gotlandic finds of precious metal consist of hoards that contain more than five objects. These hoards are of varying size. The heaviest hoard weighs more than 10 kg., while the hoard with the largest number of coins contains 5.992 pieces. The average number of coins in the silver hoards, however, falls below 500 (Östergren 1989:24).

The majority of silver hoards on Gotland – perhaps as many as 90% (Carlsson 1983:36) – are deposited during the period AD 900–1100. The hoards are usually deposited in close connection to Viking Age farmsteads (Stenberger 1958:17). During recent years extensive studies have shown that most silver hoards are directly linked to contemporary buildings. Originally a large number of hoards were probably hidden in the dwelling-house, e.g. under a floorboard (Östergren 1989:55–62).

The c. 400 Viking Age silver hoards that

are known from Gotland today are of course only a fraction of the total number that were originally deposited and not recovered. A large number of hoards – perhaps the majority – are still hidden in the soil. Almost every year at least one silver hoard is found, most of them during agricultural work. A considerable number of silver hoards must also have been found between the end of the Viking Age and the present day, without being reported to the archaeological authorities.

An attempt to establish the reasons behind the Viking Age silver hoards cannot be based on the number of hoards that are known today. Instead, an interpretation must be based on an estimate of the original number of hoards. The 400 hoards known have been estimated to amount to 5% of the total number (Carlsson 1983:34–36). If this is true, it would mean a total number of 8000 Viking Age silver hoards on Gotland. According to another estimate (Östergren 1989:250), the original number of hoards amounts to no more than 2000. The difference between these estimates is thus considerable. Of course, it is difficult to determine precisely what number should be considered relevant. In the author's opinion, however, the higher of the estimates above is the more credible.

The large number of Viking Age silver hoards on Gotland has given rise to an extensive debate. This has been summarized elsewhere (e.g. Östergren 1989:25–31) and will not be repeated here. Instead, an interpretation of the large number of silver hoards, based on the settlement situation on Gotland during the Viking Age will be presented. For some reason, this aspect does not seem to have been discussed before.

## THE SETTLEMENT SITUATION

The number of farms on Gotland during the Viking Age was according to one calculation (Carlsson 1979) c. 1200, and according to another (Östergren 1989) c. 1500. According to both estimates, however, the number of farms during the Viking Age was the same as that in the year AD 1700 (Carlsson 1979:39; Östergren 1989:232).

A territorial division of land is assumed to have taken place during the Late Iron Age. This division meant that *all* land was allotted to individual farms (Carlsson 1979:147). If this is correct, the possibilities of establishing new farms on Gotland during the Viking Age must have been very limited indeed. In this respect the settlement situation on Gotland differs considerably from that of other areas. The differences are especially apparent in relation to the Mälaren area in eastern middle Sweden, comprehensively studied in settlement archaeology (e.g. Ambrosiani 1964; Hyenstrand 1974).

In the Mälaren area new farms could be established during the Viking Age by external as well as internal colonization. External colonization consisted of people moving out to adjacent areas, not previously used for large-scale agrarian production. This kind of settlement expansion was in particular directed towards the province of Gästrikland and the coastal parts of northern Uppland (cp. Broberg 1990). In many parts of the Mälaren area internal colonization was also possible, i.e. the establishment of new farms in close connection to already existing ones. To a great

extent the prerequisites for this were the result of land elevation which exposed large areas of new land. This land was a rich economic resource, providing excellent pasture and plentiful winter fodder.

The external prerequisites for establishing new farms were thus very good in the Mälaren area. It must be stressed, however, that the *real* possibilities of establishing new farms were not dictated by the natural landscape. They were instead realized in a social sphere. It was there that decisions were made on *who* had the right to establish a new farm and on the conditions for its establishment. In spite of this, it must be concluded that the prerequisites for establishing new farms during the Viking Age were much worse on Gotland than in the Mälaren area. This must have necessitated a restrictive policy of land division on Gotland.

## POLICIES OF LAND DIVISION

It is known that a very restrictive policy of land division was practised on Gotland during the post-medieval period. This policy was aimed at keeping the land belonging to a farm undivided. To achieve this the matrimonial age was kept high, only a few children were born and only one child was allowed to inherit the farm (Kjellman 1979:87, cp. Wohlin 1915; Gaunt 1973; Löfgren 1974:237–239). Children left without inherited land were compensated by a generous dowry which gave them some chances on the matrimonial market (Kjellman 1979:98). Dowry (Sw. *hemgift*) is the term for valuables given to the bride or bridegroom by her/his relatives in connection with marriage. The historical origin of the dowry is by some researchers considered to be robbery and the purchase of brides.

The dowry was apparently a very important gift institution on Gotland during the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries. Uniformity is considered to be a characteristic feature of the Gotlandic dowry. Usually the same kinds of gifts were transferred to the new home generation after generation. The most

common gifts were bedding, clothing, beds-  
teads, furniture, household utensils and do-  
mestic animals such as lambs, cows, horses,  
pigs and oxen. It is also maintained that Got-  
landic bridal couples received a surprisingly  
large number of silver and copper objects  
(Kjellman 1979:97).

Dowries were already mentioned in the  
Swedish provincial laws of the 13th and 14th  
centuries. It has been suggested that some of  
the Gotlandic silver hoards from the Viking  
Age could be women's dowries. This applies  
especially to hoards that consist of pieces of  
women's jewellery but not to those contain-  
ing coins or hack-silver (Burenhult 1984:160,  
167).

Even during the Viking Age formal rules  
and practices that regulated land division must  
have been a necessity on Gotland. As every  
new family had to take over a farm from their  
parental generation, delaying the take-over  
must have been important. This may, as in the  
historical period, have been effected by rais-  
ing the matrimonial age. One way of doing  
this would be to operate a bridewealth system.  
It is possible that the Gotlandic silver hoards  
reflect such a system.

Before bridewealth systems are more fully  
discussed it should be noted that it has been  
previously suggested that the Viking Age sil-  
ver hoards on Gotland were connected with  
problems of land division. In this case it was  
assumed that silver was deposited by the sons  
that were not entitled to inherit the farm.  
These young men are assumed to have under-  
taken journeys to plunder silver, and the ho-  
ards are thought to be left in the ground be-  
cause their owners did not return from later jour-  
neys. The silver is said to have helped the sons  
without inheritance to create a future of their  
own, either by acquiring a share in a ship (and  
thus being able to collect even more silver) or  
by buying land (Carlsson 1983:36). The pos-  
sibilities during the Viking Age of "buying" a  
farm must, however, have been very limited.  
It has therefore been assumed that most of the  
sons with no inheritance were constantly dri-  
ven out on new Viking journeys until they

finally died (*ibid.* p. 36). This interpretation is  
not very convincing. It must have been rather  
difficult to motivate several generations of  
young men to endure severe hardships in or-  
der to acquire silver, if the ultimate purpose of  
these journeys was to get killed.

## SILVER AS BRIDEWEALTH

Bridewealth (Sw. *brudpris*) consists of marri-  
age payments from the husband and his kin to  
the bride's kin. Bridewealth systems occur in  
many different societies (cp. e.g. Westermarck  
1927). However, bridewealth is most com-  
mon among tribal food producers, both  
horticulturalists-agriculturalists and pastora-  
lists (Keesing 1981:253).

In a bridewealth system, the bridegroom  
has to present a gift – bridewealth – to the  
bride's kin, usually to her father, before mar-  
riage. The contents of this gift are dictated by  
culture-specific rules. In general, bridewealth  
constitutes a product which is difficult to  
obtain. By succeeding in obtaining bridewealth,  
the bridegroom proves that he is worthy of the  
intended bride. The difficulties in acquiring  
bridewealth are so time-consuming that the  
matrimonial age is affected.

In spite of many diversities in different  
bridewealth systems, there are also some ge-  
neral characteristics. One of these is that the  
objects exchanged as bridewealth have a sym-  
bolic prestige value. The prestige valuables,  
however diverse physically, usually have se-  
veral characteristics in common. Keesing  
(1981:253–254) has listed some of these cha-  
racteristics, and two of his points are of speci-  
al interest here:

- The prestige valuables exchanged in bride-  
wealth are sufficiently scarce (often com-  
ing from external sources) that they can-  
not easily be obtained by individual effort.
- Their circulation is controlled by senior  
men, so that in order to marry, young men  
must subordinate themselves, and become  
obligated, to their elders (and provide labor,  
political support, bear arms, etc., on their  
behalf).

These characteristics seem to correspond very well to silver on Gotland during the Viking Age. Silver is sufficiently scarce, it comes from an external source, and it cannot be easily obtained by individual effort. Regardless of whether the silver was obtained by trade or by plunder, its acquisition required collective efforts. It is not known if the circulation of silver on Gotland was controlled by senior men, but it would make perfectly good sense. If young men were forced to obtain silver in order to marry, this must have given the senior men excellent opportunities to recruit shipcrews. The equipping of ships and arming of men may have been an important instrument in the senior men's competition for social influence and political power. As a consequence of the risks associated with long-distance trade or plunder voyages, a large number of young men probably died before they managed to collect the silver necessary for marriage. For other reasons other young men were probably unable to collect the bridewealth silver. These deaths and failures facilitate the realization of a restrictive policy of land division.

According to one calculation (Carlsson 1983:36), six silver hoards were deposited at each Gotlandic farm during the period AD 900–1100. This means that during a 200 year-period one hoard per generation was deposited. Each generation is estimated to be c. 33 years. If this calculation of the deposition frequency is correct, it corresponds extremely well with an interpretation of silver hoards as bridewealth. In this case, one hoard was deposited in connection with each marriage and the matrimonial age was c. 30–35 years.

If silver was used as bridewealth in a prestige sphere, an answer to some of the central questions concerning the Gotlandic silver hoards from the Viking Age would be forthcoming. It would explain why such a large number of silver hoards have been found on the island compared to other areas. In this case the number of silver hoards is related to the settlement situation on the island. The very limited amount of space for establishing

new farms led to a restrictive policy of land division. By means of a bridewealth system the matrimonial age was raised, thus delaying the new family's takeover of the farm. In this specific historical context – Gotland during the period AD 900–1100 – silver corresponds very well with what is considered characteristic of objects used as bridewealth. In other areas, areas with a smaller number of silver hoards, the settlement situation or the possibilities of obtaining silver were different.

Provided that silver was transferred as bridewealth, this would also explain why it was deposited in hoards and why these were permitted to stay hidden instead of being transformed into other products. If silver was used as bridewealth, its primary function was fulfilled by the transaction bridewealth – bride. By obtaining the silver, the bridegroom had proved himself worthy of the bride, and the bride's kin had confirmed their status by receiving correct bridewealth. When then the transaction had been completed, the silver could be deposited on the farm belonging to the bride's parents. There, its existence was confirmation of the status of the kingroup, the family and the farm.

Silver was undoubtedly integrated into several *economic spheres* (cp. e.g. Bohannon 1959) on Gotland during the Viking Age. To some extent silver may have been used as a means of exchange at local markets. This was probably the case at the harbour settlements where a large number of single coins, weights and fragments of scales have been found. Finds of this character have also been made on farmsteads (Östergren 1989:184–186). The farms, however, must have had a subsistence production large enough to make them practically self-sufficient. For the Gotlandic farmer the primary role of silver was probably that of a prestige valuable.

If the most important role of the silver lay in a prestige sphere, it was not desirable to convert it into some other sphere. On the contrary, such a conversion could cause a serious loss of prestige (cp. Bohannon 1959). A farmer that had to use bridewealth silver to

buy domestic products may have experienced a drastic decline in social respect. It was thus the possession – or for the bridegroom the acquisition – of silver that was important, not the circulation of it. This explains why silver was deposited in hoards on farms. It was there the silver best fulfilled its prestige function, and its symbolic value was kept intact. This also explains why so many hoards have stayed in the ground until today. The hoards were originally hidden because of their prestige value and later in history when silver had increased in commercial value, they had been forgotten.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Of course, there is no *single* explanation for the large number of Viking Age silver hoards on Gotland. The archaeological picture is rather

a result of several different factors. The purpose of this article, however, has been to introduce an interpretation based on the hypothesis that silver served as bridewealth.

Here, an interpretation of an archaeological problem has been presented, although not fully integrated into a comprehensive analysis of the source material in question. This type of presentation involves both advantages and disadvantages. One *advantage* is that an idea that can hopefully stimulate further research is put forward more quickly than would otherwise have been the case. A *disadvantage* is that important aspects of the archaeological source material might have been overlooked. The author's hope is that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages.

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