The Watlington Hoard

Coinage, kings and the Viking Great Army in Oxfordshire, AD875–880

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with contributions by
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This book forms only a part of the story of the Watlington Hoard, its discovery leading to a great amount of effort by many people in relation to the acquisition, outreach and research projects undertaken since that day in early October 2015. It is hard to know quite where to begin to thank all of those involved but to start with the finder, James Mather, seems most appropriate. James did the right things from the start, reporting his find to his local Portable Antiquities Scheme Finds Liaison Officer, the late David Williams, thus enabling the bulk of the hoard to be excavated and lifted archaeologically. This helped to keep as much information in tact as possible as well as minimising the risk of damage to the coins and objects it contained, many of which are fragile. He has also been incredibly enthusiastic about his discovery and has worked hard giving much of his time for talks and events, and really thinking about what he'd found. We are very glad that James was able to contribute his own personal thoughts on finding the Watlington Hoard to this book (below, Chapter 2). David Williams's contribution, too, was fundamentally important in helping James with the initial discovery and he expertly excavated the hoard as well as undertaking the administration relating to the hoard's reporting under the Treasure Act 1996 for which he deserves our thanks and appreciation. David tragically passed away in late 2017 and it is with great sadness to us that he was unable to write up his work for this book.

The discovery was, of course, entirely unexpected. The initial finds made by James prior to excavation came into the Ashmolean Museum a couple of days later, its importance already apparent to staff in the Antiquities Department and Heberden Coin Room, and a decision to express an interest in its acquisition was quickly made. For this, the museum's director Dr Xa Sturgis deserves profound acknowledgement as this was a significant project to take on unexpectedly in an already busy museum schedule, and for his enthusiasm at acquiring the hoard for the museum's collections. As a mixed hoard of coins and other objects, its contents straddle the responsibilities of two departments (Antiquities and the Heberden Coin Room) and the Keepers of each, Dr Paul Roberts (Antiquities) and Prof Chris Howgego (Coin Room), have each supported the work on the hoard greatly and our thanks to both for enabling this to be done, especially in the time required to bring a publication such as this to fruition. Within the Coin Room, our thanks to Dr Julian Baker (Curator, Medieval and Modern Coins) who not only wrote one of the concluding chapters to this volume but also worked with his volunteers to photograph all of the coins in the hoard – used throughout this volume – and worked on many of the public outreach events. In the Antiquities Department, our thanks to Claire Burton, Bryony Smerdon, Helen Hovey and Ilaria Perzia for their work on the project. Claire Burton (Collections Manager in the department) not only helped with the reinstallation and deinstallation of the hoard on numerous occasions but also attended one of the outreach 'roadshow' events, providing endless enthusiasm and support to curatorial staff.

Outside of these two curatorial departments, staff across the Ashmolean worked extremely hard on the hoard itself and the attendant projects. The Conservation department worked hard on the hoard at short notice and our thanks to all of their staff, especially Stephanie Ward for her work on the initial conservation, and Alexandra Baldwin on the post-acquisition conservation of the hoard. Staff in the Ashmolean's Learning department organised numerous events for the public both within and outside the museum, including Helen Ward (Deputy Head of Learning), Clare Coleman, Clare Cory, Jane Cockcroft, Rowan Guthrie, and Jude Barrett (Learning Officers), and Joy Todd and Caroline Cheeseman of the Joint Museums Volunteers & Outreach team. This work included working with colleagues from the Oxfordshire County Museums Service (OCMS) on regional events around the county. We also need to thank the Development team for all their work during the fundraising; David Gowers for

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Staff at the British Museum also deserve our thanks. Both the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) and the team who administer the Treasure Act 1996 are based at the museum and were a fundamental part of the whole process. Ian Richardson and the Treasure team provided invaluable advice to us throughout the acquisition process including working with the Ashmolean's Registrars to bring the hoard to Oxford on loan from the DCMS while we ran the public appeal for its acquisition. One of us (JN) is part-funded by the PAS as their National Finds Adviser for Early Medieval and Later Coinage, and Prof Michael Lewis, Head of the Scheme, has been supportive and willing for him to work on this publication over the last 2 years to bring it to completion for which we are very grateful. We would also like to thank Dr Gareth Williams of the British Museum's Coins and Medals department who was involved with the hoard soon after its discovery and wrote the report for the coroner on the coins excavated and sent to the British Museum (see Chapter 2) as required under the Treasure Act 1996 (Ager *et al* 2016). Gareth co-authored a book on the hoard with JN, produced at short notice for the acquisition appeal (Williams and Naylor 2016), and discussions with him on 9th-century coinage and Viking hoarding were always informative and useful. Any errors or omissions on these topics obviously remain our own. Gareth had intended to provide the final discussion for this book, and gave a paper at the Ashmolean conference in November 2018, but unfortunately was unable to write this up for publication in the end.

Our thanks are extended to the authors who have all contributed to this book, exploring the story of the Watlington Hoard and its world, both historical and in the present day. Most of the papers contained here were first presented at the Ashmolean conference in late 2018 and we are also grateful to Alexandra Baldwin and Simon Coupland for their contributions which were commissioned at a later date. The two peer reviewers of the book provided excellent, detailed comments and suggestions which have helped to make this a more rounded and better volume, and they deserve our thanks for this work. Any errors remain the responsibility of the authors. Our thanks also to Ben Heaney and David Davison at Archaeopress for their help and advice throughout and for producing a lovely final product!

Finally, the hoard would not have been acquired by the Ashmolean Museum if it were not for the many kind donations made by members of the public and other donors. We are extremely grateful to the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF), The Art Fund (with a contribution from the Wolfson Foundation) and the Ashmolean Friends and Patrons who all provided grants to help us to bring the hoard into our collections. The pivotal NLHF grant also provided funds for our outreach projects including this publication.

John Naylor and Eleanor Standley, Oxford, May 2021

Foreword

Xa Sturgis, Director of the Ashmolean Museum

This monograph on the Watlington Hoard is the culmination of over five years of research and public engagement events that have taken place since this nationally important find was discovered by the metal detectorist James Mather near Watlington, Oxfordshire in 2015. The Hoard is one of the Ashmolean's most exciting and important acquisitions in recent years: coins, silver and gold that shed fascinating light on a key moment in the history of England. It now sits within the Ashmolean's Anglo-Saxon collections, alongside the world-famous Alfred Jewel.

Following his discovery of the hoard James Mather reported his extraordinary find to the Portable Antiquities Scheme. It was excavated and declared Treasure (under the Treasure Act 1996) by the Oxfordshire coroner. The Ashmolean and the Oxfordshire County Museum Service (OCMS) then had the opportunity to acquire the Hoard. Working together the two institutions formed a joint proposal to promote the hoard, plan public engagement and knowledge-exchange programmes in the county, and to fundraise the £1.35 million needed for the acquisition. The Ashmolean was to be the final destination for the treasure, and it is now curated jointly by the Antiquities Department (non-numismatic objects) and the Heberden Coin Room (the coins).

I am profoundly grateful for the grants from the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Art Fund (with a contribution from the Wolfson Foundation), the Ashmolean Friends and Patrons; and for the generous support from many members of the public and the people of Oxfordshire who made the acquisition possible and for supporting the programme of exhibitions and public engagement which accompanied it, of which this volume is one part. It has also been a great pleasure to have worked closely with the staff at the OCMS, Oxfordshire Play Association and Oxfordshire Libraries, as well as those outside the county in the British Museum, Nottingham Lakeside Arts, and the JORVIK Viking Centre, York. I am immensely grateful to all those who have been involved in the project and who have contributed to this volume.

These are uniquely challenging times. As I write we have once again had to close the Museum to help in the government's efforts to control the COVID-19 pandemic. Archaeological finds such as the Watlington Hoard remind us of other periods of national emergency and indeed of our capacity to overcome them. Within the collections of the Ashmolean are countless objects and works of art that help us reflect on humanity's response to and resilience through moments of crisis and in doing so help our own resilience, sense of connection and understanding. The small delicate fragments of the Watlington Hoard, buried and then found centuries later are testament to how archaeological finds can shed unexpected light on our shared past, changing our understanding of Oxfordshire's past during another uncertain time, but also the national history of a united kingdom.

List of Abbreviations

ASC *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*; text in Plummer 1892–99; trans. in Whitelock *et al.* 1965

EMC Corpus of Early Medieval Coin Finds < https://emc.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/>

PAS Portable Antiquities Scheme <http://finds.org.uk>

PASE King's College London and University of Cambridge, *Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England* <http://www.pase.ac.uk>

S P. H. Sawyer (ed.), *Anglo-Saxon Charters: An Annotated List and Bibliography*, Royal Historical Society Guides and Handbooks, 8 (London, 1968); revised version ed. S. E. Kelly, R. Rushforth *et al.*, for the *Electronic Sawyer: Online Catalogue of Anglo-Saxon Charters* website, King's College London http://www.esawyer.org.uk

SCBI Sylloge of Coins of the British Isles

tpq *terminus post quem*

Chapter 1

Introduction

The hoard that forms the focus for this book was discovered on farmland in the vicinity of the small Oxfordshire town of Watlington in October 2015. It consists of 203 coins, most of which were issued by the early-medieval kingdoms of Wessex and Mercia in the late 870s, and silver ingots and metalwork — some in the form of fragmented hack-silver and a single piece of hack-gold. The metalwork and ingots provide connections to Scandinavia and the Vikings, while the coin-dating points to a formative period in the late 9th century when the Viking Great Army was raiding across Wessex and finally faced defeat against Alfred the Great in 878 at the Battle of Edington (Wiltshire). It is undoubtedly a highly significant find, not least because it is the first such hoard from the Upper Thames Valley, and its value reaches far beyond Oxfordshire and the 9th century.

This volume has drawn together specialist chapters with the aim of presenting the contents of the hoard and its economic and political significance, as well as the hoard's more recent history which includes its discovery, conservation and use in public engagement. While the former topics are typical for a research publication the latter highlights that the Watlington Hoard is not only an ancient artefact but also has its own modern history, which is too-often part of the story that does not reach the pages of scholarly publications.

The hoard was discovered by a metal-detectorist and was processed through the Treasure Act 1996; but the existing relationship between the finder, James Mather, and archaeologists in the Ashmolean Museum and the Portable Antiquities Scheme was important in the process of reporting, understanding the findspots of the disturbed hoard, and the final excavation. This is just one of the many links that has been built up between responsible metal-detectorists and archaeologists since the Portable Antiquities Scheme started recording finds in 1997. The experience of James Mather is important here as is the discussion of the archaeological methods employed to excavate and lift an in-situ hoard, as presented by Mather and Corke (Chapter 2, sections 2.1 and 2.2). The conservation work undertaken at two institutions (the British Museum and Ashmolean Museum) as part of the remit of the Treasure Act 1996 and after its acquisition by the Ashmolean, is described by Pierce and Baldwin in Chapter 2, sections 2.3 and 2.4, and highlights the careful and varied behind-the-scenes work which is undertaken away from the spotlight in all museums. The modern context of the Watlington Hoard also includes its role in museum displays and how such finds can be used in outreach. The success of this work is an indication of the ability of archaeological discoveries and subsequent research into life, identity and power of the past to continue to captivate the enthusiasm of the public, and is an aspect that we wish to promote in Chapter 2, section 2.5 (Standley with Ward).

Such interest in and willingness to support archaeological acquisitions is also recognisable in the fact that the discovery of the Watlington Hoard coincided with a flurry of other Viking-Age hoards unearthed in Britain between 2004 and 2015, many of which are now in museum collections. Large hoards of metalwork, coinage and hack-silver such as those from the 'Vale

of York', 'Silverdale' and 'Galloway' have received international media attention and other smaller groups of objects, such as the Huxley and 'Furness' hoards, garnered national interest (e.g. Graham-Campbell and Philpott 2009; Ager and Williams 2011; Williams 2011a; Ager 2020). These hoards are complemented by the many individual but contemporary precious metal ingots, jewellery and coinage that have been found. Most of the discoveries have come to light by hobbyist metal-detecting, and the mandatory reporting of hoards and precious metal objects under the Treasure Act 1996 (England, Wales and Northern Ireland; HM Government 1996) or the Treasure Trove system in Scotland (Queen's and Lord Treasurer's Remembrancer 2016).

Together, these hoards and stray finds provide an important corpus of material for study. Where the Viking-Age finds can be closely dated — generally only through the presence of coinage — it places most of them within the first half of the 10th century, generally to the period *c.*900–30 (Williams 2009: 73–74). Virtually all have been found north of the line which can be drawn between the Rivers Dee/Mersey and Humber. This perhaps represents the connections between York and the Dublin/Irish Sea routes of the period (Williams 2009: 78–79; see Kershaw, Chapter 7, Figure 7.13). In comparison, the Watlington Hoard is something of an outlier, both in its date of deposition around the late 870s/early 880s and in its findspot. As one of few large Viking-Age hoards from southern Britain this means that it has the potential to answer a different range of questions whilst contributing to the broader exploration of silver economies in the Viking Age, an area of study for which important new work has been undertaken in recent years (e.g. Graham-Campbell and Williams 2007; Graham-Campbell *et al* 2011; Kershaw 2017).

The approach taken in this book is intended to explore the Watlington Hoard in a number of ways. The underlying historical and archaeological context of the hoard's deposition is as important to consider as its contents. Understanding the evolution and formation of early-medieval settlements, and the political context of these developments, are important aspects in the interpretation of the hoard's burial location. Similarly a discussion of the broader landscape into which it was buried provides further context as this was an area encompassing the River Thames, the ancient east-west route of the Icknield Way and the traditional boundary between Mercia and Wessex. Chapters 3 (Naylor) and 4 (Lavelle) provide this contextual exploration of the region and reflect on the hoard's location in a dynamic zone of communication, trade and settlement, and where the Mercia–Wessex relationship was visible and memorialised in the landscape.

The contents of the hoard are obviously highly significant in their own right, and their publication is a central part of this book (Catalogues 1–2). The coinage, especially, is an extremely valuable new source of material and is considered in detail by Naylor (Chapters 5 and 6) and Baker (Chapter 8). The coins, struck by Alfred of Wessex (871–99), Ceolwulf II of Mercia (874–79?) and Archbishop Æthelred of Canterbury (870–89), are rare jointly-issued types, and the most recent analysis prior to the discovery of the Watlington Hoard was undertaken in the late 1990s (Blackburn and Keynes 1998). This new corpus of coins in the Watlington Hoard allows fresh analysis of the main types issued in the late 870s — the Two Emperors and Cross-and-Lozenge — and can advance our understanding of both. In addition, the sheer number

of coins in the Watlington Hoard is such that new, detailed discussion of the organisation of minting, the structure of the coinage and its chronology is possible.

The other objects in the hoard — the ingots, jewellery and hack-metal — are a large and important group and are considered by Kershaw in Chapter 7. The early date of the pieces makes them a significant new form of evidence for the connections with Scandinavia in the mid to late 9th century during the period that the Viking Great Army was moving across Britain. Recent archaeological research has done much to advance our knowledge of the nature of their camps and associated activity across parts of the Midlands and northern England, and the Watlington Hoard — and other data from the region — may inform on the debates focussed on southern England (see Hadley and Richards 2016; 2018).

From the time of its discovery, the potential links between the Watlington Hoard and the Viking Great Army have formed an important part of the interpretation (Williams and Naylor 2016: 13–22; 29–30). The hoard's burial around the end of the 870s places it after the Battle of Edington in 878 which marked the last phase of the Viking raiding and conquest of the preceding decade or so, and initial work on the hoard suggested it may have been buried as the Viking Great Army moved away from Wessex towards East Anglia following their defeat at Edington and overwintering at Cirencester (Williams and Naylor 2016: 29–30). In Chapter 9, Naylor's final discussion provides a culmination of the Watlington Hoard's current interpretation where he considers the acquisition, use and deposition of the contents, and how Watlington, together with other hoards and stray finds can be related to warfare, politics and shifting power. No doubt future research on the hoard and further discoveries from the 9th century will expand our knowledge and understanding of this dynamic period.