

*Scotland's Early Silver: transforming Roman pay-offs to Pictish Treasures*. Alice Blackwell, Martin Goldberg and Fraser Hunter. National Museums Scotland: Edinburgh, 2017. 171pp. £15.98, paperback. ISBN 978-1-910682-12-8.

*Scotland's Early Silver* is the product of a magnificent exhibition held by the National Museums of Scotland in 2017. A quick glance at the show produced a sense of déjà-vue. All the glittering favourites of the national collection of early silver were on display: prominent were the hoards of Traprain Law, St Ninian's Isle and Norries Law. But the intellectual theme behind the exhibition presented these treasures in a new context, not as works of art for their own sake but as witness to a socio-economic and aesthetic evolution. In this show and book, the purpose of the objects is more important than their style and virtuosity. The book delivers even more than the exhibition because its sumptuous colour close-up photographs reveal far more than the naked eye can glean from a show case. The book also highlights for the first time the glut of recent finds from Dairsie, Gaulcross and Galloway. The diversity of these new discoveries greatly expands our understanding of their time, while generating their own further mysteries.

The underlying premise is that Scotland produced very little silver from its own lead mines in the period AD 75-1000. Until the Vikings released a fresh supply of silver from the East, all the Scottish treasures were recycled from hefty Roman pay-offs, delivered during the Roman imperial era to pacify their northern British frontier. Four themes develop the story: a technical explanation of metallurgy; what the Romans delivered; what the Picts recycled; and new sources of silver from the Vikings. A history of making silver explains the diagnostic significance of its fluctuating purity. Early Roman silver was relatively pure, towards the end of the Empire it became debased and under the Picts a mixture of the various Roman grades were melted together with further dilutions of copper, tin and other metals. Roman pay-offs began as exotic coinage, poured as targeted favours into a non-monetary economy, for instance in the Birnie hoard. By the third to fourth centuries, coins were replaced by the spectacular parcels of hack silver which reveal so much about the conspicuous consumption of the Roman elite, as at Traprain Law and Dairsie. In the fourth to sixth century, the first evidence of recycling begins, with the emergence of early Pictish ornaments like pins and then the extraordinary silver chains. The chains, possibly intended for women or young children because of their size, become new symbols of identity and status. By their sheer weight, they also indicate how large quantities of Roman silver were still accessible. Between 400 and 800, the quality of workmanship becomes more significant: a little silver, perhaps with gold highlights and some flashing jewels, could create gleaming impact in the form of brooches like Hunterston and the St Ninian's collection. Whereas pins, chains and rings had previously denoted status, by the eighth century the format was predominantly brooches with a hint on sword fittings like the St Ninian's chape. It is chilling to equate the increasing size (and vulgarity?) of jewellery in the Viking age, those immense thistle brooches, with blood money, payment for Scottish slaves sold to the east. At this stage, the prevalence of Anglo-Saxon and Arabic coins serves to underline the absence of native Scottish coinage which was not introduced until the twelfth century.

Geography and location play a key part in the book, amply supplied with maps. Dated deposits of the Roman coin hoards extend meagre historical information. From these it is possible to work out which tribes were being pacified and when, and equally when payments stopped or destabilised a region. Throughout, most of the book is about the eastern side of Scotland where the silver was delivered and reworked. While silver signified exotic status in the East, the West flaunted its foreign connections with wine, oil, pottery and glassware; dress in the East and feasting in the West. Location is not just regional but also site-specific. Hoards were frequently buried near some significant site, perhaps as a votive offering like the hoard at Birnie buried in a hole marked by a post

by the door of a house; or near some ancient monument like Gaulcross by standing stones. The St Ninian's Isle box, buried under the floor of a church suggests a wish for God's protection and perhaps eventual recovery. The enigmatic concealment of the Galloway hoard, hidden within layer after layer of protection requires further explanation, and clearly this hoard was only emerging while the book was being written.

These treasures have received considerable attention in other exhibitions and books, each of which could be said to focus on questions of identity. *The Work of Angels* (ed. Susan Youngs, 1989) collected treasures from England, Scotland and Ireland in order to define the common features shared by Insular art from the sixth to ninth centuries. By contrast *The Art of the Picts* (George and Isabel Henderson, 2004) draws out the unique characteristics of Pictish art within the swirling influences of the Insular world. *Celts: art and identity* (ed. Julia Farley and Fraser Hunter, 2015) focusses on the common features shared by Celtic art throughout Europe, and therefore looks at mainly the Celtic rather than Anglo-Saxon or Roman influences which also prevailed in Scotland. *Scotland's Early Silver*, by moving away from style and identity to material and function thus complements and adds to these previous studies. The introduction makes clear that silver had a uniquely high status in the Scottish economy for 1000 years. This perhaps unexpected value could have been more forcibly underlined with a few more words on Ireland and Anglo-Saxon England, where the 'gold standard' prevailed. Just a mention of the Staffordshire Hoard, for both its gold metal and the military nature of its objects, would highlight the great differences in the Scottish story. But that is only a quibble about a book which both delights and informs.

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