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Cover photo: Uppland runestone U 654, Varpsund, Övergrans sn., Sweden, raised by the sons of "Gunnleifr, their father, who was killed in the east with Ingvar...He could steer a cargo-ship well." Photo copyright © 2008 Daniel C. Waugh.

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The Spillings Hoard in the Gotlands Museum

The Spillings Hoard – Gotland's Role in Viking Age World Trade. Visby: Gotlands Museum, 2009. 205 pp. ISBN 978-91-88036-71-1.

July 26, 1999, was a day to remember, for the discovery on the Spillings farm in Othem parish, northeastern Gotland, of the largest Viking Age silver hoard in the world. Gotland, an island in the Baltic, was immensely important in the trading networks of northern Europe both in the Viking Age and later in the Hanseatic period. The silver alone in the Spillings Hoard weighed 67 kg, and in addition some 20 kg of bronze objects were found on the site where they had been buried under the floor of a dwelling some time after 870/871 CE (the latest date of one of the 14,300 coins, most of them Arab dirhams). The discovery became a media sensation; the public was invited to watch the excavation; Crown Princess Victoria, the heir to the Swedish throne, opened the exhibit of the material in the Gotland Museum in 2007.

This nicely illustrated, multi-authored volume is a tantalizing introduction to the Spillings Hoard and its significance. We learn about the history of the discovery and the farm where it was found. For the farm, Per Widerström lays out the archaeological evidence from excavations that still are not complete, and Dan Carlsson draws upon archival survey maps to flesh out a picture of the local economy and its changes over time. Students of the Silk Road will find of greatest interest Gun Westholm's chapter on "Gotland and the Surrounding World," which pulls together a largely well-known picture of the extent of Viking-era trade, and Nils Bolmkvist's essay "Traces of a Global Economic Boom that Came and Went," which sets the history in the context of well-known interpretations by Pirenne, Bolin, Hodges, Whitehouse and others.

Oddly, perhaps, where the book disappoints is in its analysis of the Spillings Hoard itself, perhaps because that analysis is still far from complete, given the huge amount of material that was found. We find here nice illustrations of objects and some of the most interesting coins,

a few pages of general description, but no real analytical detail. Enough, I suppose, for the general audience for which this book is intended, but leaving this reader wanting much more.

Undoubtedly my observation here has been conditioned by the opportunity I had in June of this year to view the exhibits in the Gotlands Museum, where the Spillings Hoard occupies pride of place amongst the many such hoards which have been discovered on that island. As my accompanying pictures may suggest, the potential to learn from this material is immense, for it informs us about objects of daily life, a complex economy, and farflung international contacts. Of particular interest are the displays of the coins grouped according to the regions in which they originated and accompanied by maps showing the locations of the various mints. The coins range in date from the 6th century (a few Sasanian examples) down to 870/871. Most of them come from the central lands of the Arab Caliphate (but from dozens of different mints), with isolated examples from as far away as the Maghrib. Although few in number, among the most interesting coins were ones minted in Khazaria in imitation of the Arab dirhams. Most famously, here we find the "Moses coin" on which we read "Moses is God's Messenger," instead of the expected naming of Muhammad, reflecting the fact that the Khazar elite had converted to Judaism.

It would have been nice had the book included a listing of mints and coin dates and an indication of the relative percentages of the coins from each location or at least region. The analysis (of at least some 5000 of the coins) has been done, but it is not clear whether it has yet been fully published. How many more of the coins might be dated is, of course, a good question, since one of the two containers of the silver survived in poor condition, apparently because the sack in which they had been placed had been impregnated with salt from some other prior use. Moreover, as is the case with such hoards, often the coins have been chopped up, since the important thing back then was not face value but the weight of the silver. There is ample evidence of that fact in the large quantity of silver rings, bracelets, ingots, and various kinds of scrap which were buried with the coins, some of the material in bundles of

standard weight. Many of the coins themselves have cuts, made presumably when they were tested for purity.

In its room devoted to the Spillings Hoard [for illustrations, see below], the museum has a very well designed projection of an interactive computerized description of the material, where one can view the reconstruction drawings of the original farm, see details of the various artifacts, even rotating some of them on screen, see highlighted the most interesting parts of the imagery and inscriptions on examples of the coins and read an accompanying descriptive text. Would that a disk with this presentation had been available to purchase along with the book under review here, since the electronic presentation adds another dimension to what we have here in print.

The Spillings Hoard then is hugely important, if for no reason other than its size and the fact that it

has stimulated so much research into the context in which it was deposited. If one could have only one of the Viking-age hoards found all over Eastern and Northern Europe, this is probably the one to choose. Granted, in most ways it does not change the picture we have known for some time about the extent of Viking-age trade and the role of Scandinavia in it. What we can hope is that historians of the “Silk Roads” will pay more attention to this material in the future, since it all helps document in important ways what was going on in Western Eurasia and reminds us vividly of how important were the Islamic lands and the northern Europeans who traded with them in the early centuries of the Caliphate. “Silk Road” exhibitions almost without exception have always highlighted East and, to a lesser degree, Central Asia. That, however, is only part of the story.

— Daniel C. Waugh

The Spillings Hoard Displayed and Explained



Photos copyright © 2011 Daniel C. Waugh

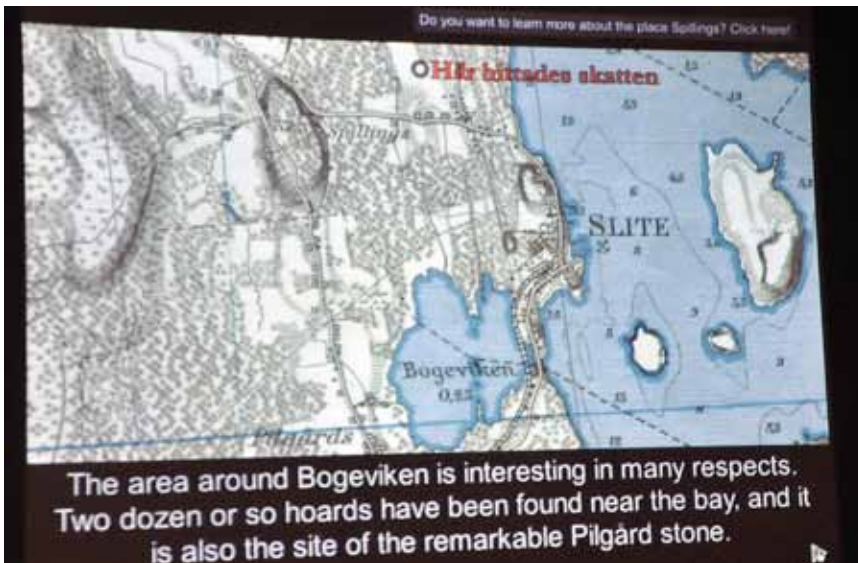


Upper left: part of silver hoard no. 1, whose total weight was 27 kg. Lower left: a screen shot from the video, showing the block-lifted bottom layer of hoard no. 1.

Right: part of silver hoard no. 2, weighing 40 kg. and containing 312 armlets, 20 bars, 30 arm rings, 20 finger rings and over 10,000 coins, most of them Arab dirhams.



The silver was obviously valued for its weight: bundles of arm bands matched multiples of standard Gotland weights. Significant amounts of the silver were in the form of bars or scrap.



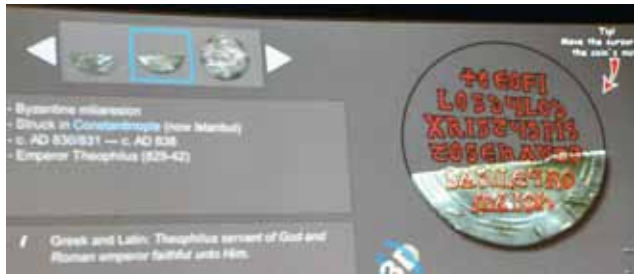
The video display shows the location of the Spillings Farm and the find spot of the hoard in the upper center. The harbor at Bogevisken was probably the most important one on Gotland in the period when the hoard was buried in the late 9th century; the hoard is one of many found in the area. Also found nearby was the famous Pilgård runestone, commemorating a Viking who perished in the rapids on the Dnieper River below Kiev.



The displays include a computerized reconstruction of the Viking house showing the locations of the three main hoards in it. Probably the site was that of a metalsmith's shop. The hoard containing bronze scrap was possibly deemed as valuable as that with the silver. A good many other bronze and iron objects have been found in excavations in the surrounding territory of the farm.



Examples of the coins from different regions are displayed in separate windows below wall maps indicating the location of their mints; here, the window with coins from Iran – each example accompanied by the date of the coin. One is impressed by the geographic and chronological range of the mints represented. While most coins are from the central lands of the Caliphate, some come from as far west as the Maghrib (northwest Africa) and as far south as Yemen. The earliest coins are a few Sasanian examples from the 6th century; the latest coin is an Arab dirham dated 870/71. A few of the coins are of non-Arab origin -- Byzantine or north European. Since some coins have been pierced and/or have hangers attached to them, they must have been used as jewelry or sewn to garments as decoration. Many coins have slashes in them, probably made when the purity of the metal was tested; many are fragmentary.



The interactive video display is very helpful to lead beginners through the basics of understanding images and inscriptions on the coins. In the example above, it even provides a reconstruction of the complete inscription on a fragmentary Byzantine coin and its translation. In the example to the right, it explains the Sasanian royal imagery on a dirham but, unfortunately, garbles the date conversion.



The video display explaining the design of the famous "Moses" coin issued by the Khazars probably in 837/8 CE. While its design imitates that of earlier, genuine Arab dirhams, in the declaration of faith, the Khazars, recent converts to Judaism, replaced the name of Muhammad with that of Moses.



The youngest of the coins in the Spillings Hoard, minted in 870/71, but of indeterminate provenance due to its fragmentary nature. Generally coin hoards are dated from the youngest coin they contain, which provides the terminus post quem for the burial of the hoard, here estimated to have occurred sometime around 880. The range of the coin dates in this hoard though is very broad, covering some three centuries.