

# Viking Age Gold Rings and the Question of “Gefolgschaft”

BY ANTJE WENDT

## Abstract

Wendt, Antje. 2008. *Viking Age Gold Rings and the Question of “Gefolgschaft”*. *Lund Archaeological Review* 13-14 (2007-2008), pp. 75–90.

For the Roman Iron Age and Migration Period, based on the combination of the find context and written sources, it has convincingly been proven that gold arm-rings were associated with military retinue systems. For the Viking Age, gold rings have been neglected as an important object group until now. The Old Norse written sources, with many references to gold rings offer a great potential to analyse their function in the Viking Age. The article discusses the fact that gold rings do not appear in burials in this period any more, but are found almost exclusively in single hoards, and that in contrast to their silver counterparts they were never cut down into pieces.

Antje Wendt, Department of Prehistoric and Early Medieval Archaeology, Christian Albrechts University, Kiel.

## Introduction

The following article is a short approach to the topic which will be the main subject in a broader study. The focus is on the function and meaning of gold rings in connection with Old Norse written sources. Gold rings are a kind of material which was always included in the studies about the big early medieval hack-silver finds of Scandinavia (Grieg 1929; Skovmand 1942; Stenberger 1947, 1958; Hårdh 1976, 1996; Wiechmann 1996) but they have never been analysed for themselves. That circumstance distinguishes them from the archaeology of the Late Roman Iron Age and Migration Period, which focuses on gold finds.

## “Gefolgschaft” in the Late Roman Iron Age and Migration Period

Archaeologists who deal with the Late Roman Iron Age and Migration Period assume that the social system is based on “Gefolgschaften” or warrior retinues. This theory is developed on the basis of the historical source of Tacitus and his description of the *comitatus* (*Germania*, cc. 13, 14) as a kind of social system in *Barbaricum*. This text passage is still intensely discussed and it is not certain how the social system described really worked.

The preoccupation with *Gefolgschaften* is even more fraught, as the concept is affected in many different ways. The definition of this kind of social concept is influenced by modern scientific ideas of retinue systems amal-

gated with the reports of ancient historians, which should be assessed critically. In H. Steuer's opinion (Steuer 1998, p. 546) retinue systems are basically military concepts, which combine the aim of gaining political power by a mutual relationship which is judicially regulated. One suggestion as to how this kind of social system could have worked is that it was structured in an open ranking system including payment methods. The retainers were rewarded by their ruler with weapons, horses and jewellery. Gold rings had a special position between all the other gifts because it seemed as if they functioned also as a symbol for affiliation to a ruler (perhaps the king) (Steuer 1982; Steuer 1998). They reflected the ritual-religious act of joining the retainers, which was mostly connected with ritual meals, drinking rituals or religious slaughter. The relations between retainers and their ruler existed beyond the death of one member. Because of this it is in some cases possible to connect archaeological material with retinue systems.

As mentioned above, the retinue system circumscribes a judicial-religious relationship between humans which is very complex and avoids archaeological traceability. It is not possible to interpret those objects exclusively on the basis of material sources. In connection with the written sources however, the evidence of retainers in the Roman Iron Age and the Migration Period seems to have been proved archaeologically.

## The symbols of the Late Roman Iron and Migration Period "Ge-folgschaft"

In the Late Roman Iron Age there are suddenly finds of gold neck-, arm- and finger-rings appearing in graves or deposits. As U. Lund Hansen (1998, 2001) deduced, the

jewellery was used as means of payment but at the same time the different ring types were often interpreted as badges of rank.

In connection with Tacitus' report they are therefore thought to be connected with the retainers of the king (elite?)

Even the most famous male weapon graves and war booty sacrifices of the Late Roman Iron Age contain gold rings (Lund-Hansen 1998, 2001; v. Carnap-Bornheim 1996), like the arm-ring from the male grave Himmlingøje 1894, Denmark (Lund-Hansen 2001, p. 182), the neck-ring from Avaldsnes, Norway or the gold ring deposits in the war booty sacrifices of Illerup Ådal, Denmark, Thorsbjerg, Germany, Porskjær, Denmark or Skedemosse, Sweden (v. Carnap-Bornheim 1996, 349ff.). V. Carnap-Bornheim demonstrated impressively the function of gold arm and neck-rings as Late Roman Iron Age military badges of rank which can be traced back to Sarmatian burials of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC. Especially Colben arm-rings present a very uniform type of ring which occur from the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century until the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC as status symbols in the north-western barbaricum (v. Carnap-Bornheim 1996, 360).

Beside gold rings other gifts which symbolized the relationship between ruler and follower occur in the Migration Period – for example weapons or clothes. Especially the sword had a very special meaning, often described in the Icelandic sagas and also in *Beowulf* as an object with own life and biography. For the Migration Period ring swords represent retainer symbols which are commonly found in the burials of high-ranking warriors. But even in these rich graves one can find some kind of gradation between very rich graves and less rich ones. As Steuer (1987) pointed out, the symbolic meaning of the pair of rings on the weapon was obviously more important than one's personal wealth or the value of the sword. The ring sword was initially a continental tradition – used in the *antrustio* of the Frankish

kings. This kind of Frankish “Gefolgschaft” is different from the one described by Tacitus in the preceding periods. The retainers were no longer free men, but dependent on their ruler. Because of the Swedish ring-sword finds Steuer (1987) is the opinion of that a continental tradition was taken over by some Scandinavian retainers coming home from the Frankish realm. Perhaps they did not only establish the ring sword as a sign of power but also initiated the whole *antrustio* system in their Scandinavian homelands with a pagan background. The role of the ring sword in that system is to characterize the personal relationship or – better – the personal commitment between ruler and retainer.

### “Gefolgschaft” in the Viking Age

It is not until the Middle Ages that there is evidence for the existence of retinue systems in the written sources. One example from Norway is the *Hirðskrá*, which was first written down between 1274 and 1277. The *Hirðskrá* is the law of the Norwegian warrior retainers and their duties (Bagge 1991b, p. 34). Here it is clear that a very important point seemed to be obedience and loyalty to the king or ruler. A similar law for Danish retainers was the *Vitherslagsret*, which appeared in different written forms and times, first in the 12<sup>th</sup> century (Strauch 2006). But both law texts, *Hirðskrá* and *Vitherslagsret*, seem to have been composed on the basis of older orally transmitted laws (cf. Bagge 1991b). Although it is therefore very likely that such kind of retinue systems can be postulated in early medieval times, it may be assumed that Viking Age retinue systems differed very much from the ones described in the medieval law texts. From the 12<sup>th</sup> century onwards the *hird* became centre of an imperial aristocracy which later formed the “Dienstadel” (Bagge 1991a). Then the relationship to the king became more and more

indissoluble and the ideology of subjection to the king was a central point of the *hird*. Concerning the Viking Age, it is assumed that retinue systems were open-ranked and most likely still based on gift-giving, as accepted for the Late Roman Iron Age and Migration Period. By this custom different people were bound together by the exchange of gifts.

### Gift-giving as “weapons in the battle for social position”

L. Hedeager (1994, p. 132) pointed out that “the Scandinavian societies of the Viking period were open systems in which every single member or every individual family had continually to defend his or their position against others, theoretically of equal rank.” Apart from physical protection, the safeguarding of one’s position in society could be achieved by the use of the gift-giving system. The Old Norse written sources, skaldic and Eddic poetry as well as Icelandic sagas, often describe this phenomenon with weapons, ships and jewellery as gifts but gold rings are also mentioned. These special kinds of payment formed the basis of the gift-giving economy of that time. Those gifts were “the axis around which the upper stratum of society moved; by means of the gift and the reciprocal gift social systems were continually recreated” (ibid, p. 132). Wealth in that time meant not only material wealth but primarily wealth in social position, alliances and connections. These connections and alliances were achieved through the exchange of gifts. With B. Hårdh (1976, p. 16) in that case we can talk of gifts as “special-purpose money” that fulfils only some functions of money. But even though material wealth such as gold and silver seems to have been the “weapons in the battle for social position” (Hedeager 1994, p. 132), gold rings have to be treated separately,

as they obviously had a special function as symbols for a relationship between chieftain and his men.

## Gold rings in the written sources: the presents of the king

In the Old Norse written sources gold rings are often described as a gift of the king or a ruler to his men or are related to the kings men. The latter is the case in the 19<sup>th</sup> stanza of the poem *Haraldskvæði* (*Hrafnsmál*) by Þórbjörn hornklofi:

*Á gerðum sér þeira*  
On their clothes one sees

*ok á gollbaugum*  
and on their gold rings

*at eru i kunnleikum við konung*  
that they are friends of the king

[...]  
[...]

*es þeim Haraldr valði*  
how Harald donated them.

With his verse the poet characterizes one of the most important attributes of retainers in the early Middle Ages in Scandinavia. This Norwegian source from the 12<sup>th</sup> century<sup>1</sup> describes how men were recognizable as the king's men because of their gold rings as attributes. In that source the poet used the old Icelandic word *gollbaugum*, which means gold ring and derives from *baugr*. Another word which was used in order to describe rings is *hringr*. Even though both words mean gold ring, they were used in different contexts, depending on the particular function of the ring. S. Engeler (1991), who examined Old Norse words for money, tried to ascertain whether *baugr* was

a word for ring-money or not. She concluded that the word was exclusively used only for gold rings and not for the ones made out of silver. The word occurs in all genres of Old Norse literature – skaldic and Eddic poetry as well as in the Icelandic sagas. Nevertheless it seems that the function is a different one in each type of genre. In this context only some of the references which were found in the skaldic poetry will be introduced as they can be regarded as Viking Age primary sources.<sup>2</sup> In connection with the word *lestir* the term *baugr* in skaldic poetry meant “ring-breaker”. Originally it was thought that *baugr-lestir* was an expression meaning “ring money”, but it turned out that it actually describes the king as a generous man. Hence *baugr* can rather be comprehended in the sense of “a preciousness” or “a present”. In its function the word stands in the group of other words for a special kind of money.

The term *baugr* proves the existence of a special type of fee or wage for particular persons who were retainers (and maybe poets?) of the king or ruler. The *baugr* itself was only awarded by the ruler himself. The gold ring in that function as a reward for retainers given by the king is not only mentioned in the Old Norse sources but also in some Saxon and Old High German written sources. For example in the Old High German *Hildebrandslied* (33) or the Saxon *Heliand*. Here the gold ring is also a generous present from the king, *bâg-gebo* “ring-giver” (*Heliand* 2738) to his *bâg-wini* “ring-friend” (*Heliand* 2756) – the retainer. Though written down in the 9<sup>th</sup> century the idea in both these texts has to be chronologically assigned to the Late Roman Iron Age and Migration Period. They therefore document the existence of a long tradition of the use of gold rings as a symbol of the relationship between king and follower.

The gold ring as a gift is also preserved in Icelandic sagas, but it is always difficult to interpret these sources, and the discussion con-

cerning the sagas is a very controversial one. They are regarded as secondary sources, but at the same time these sources give us an account of Viking Age social organization. It is not clear whether the traditions described may be older than suggested, and most probably they partly reflect younger customs or incidents as they were written 200 or 300 years after the Viking Age. Moreover, it is necessary to say that they probably do not always illustrate "real life" but reflect ideas or imagination too.

Nevertheless, given the frequent occurrence of gold rings in connection with the king or a ruler in all Old Norse written sources, it seems reasonable to suggest that they played an essential role in the gift-giving economy of the Viking Age – not only because of their material value but also because of their symbolic meaning. Gold rings did not possess all of the functions that money had and – as their written tradition and find context indicates – they were indeed not used as common payment.

## The archaeological state of source

The number of gold objects found in graves and hoards in the Migration Period is remarkably high. While silver was the "everyday money" in the Viking Age, gold had that function during the Migration Period (Wiechmann 1996, p. 184). In the Viking Age the amount of gold decreases radically. In comparison to the quantity of silver rings, gold rings are very rare though with an actual number of 288 items (neck-, arm- and finger-rings) it is much higher than presumed (Fig. 1).

Besides the divergent amount of rings, the character of silver and gold finds differs too. Silver rings of every size – arm-, finger- and neck-rings – appear in a huge number in the hack-silver hoards, while gold rings almost exclusively occur as single finds or appear as a

small group of rings found together in hoard contexts (Fig. 2). Their execution is nearly the same – they consist of one or more rods curled together into one ring, regardless of whether they were made of silver or gold. While neck-rings were exclusively curled, arm- and finger-rings could be manufactured as massive bracelets too. The latter forms appear mainly on Gotland and Bornholm. The most important difference between gold and silver rings in general is the fact that gold was never cut down to pieces.

While the amount of hack-gold in the Migration Period was extremely high, we know only one or two examples of hack-gold in the Viking Age. To group the gold rings in a specific typical order, it is necessary to connect them to the silver ring material. The different silver ring types were included in different typology systems. Because of the similarity in their construction one can transfer those typological systems to the gold rings. The two latest typologies are those of Hårdh (1976, p. 48), which is based on the southern Swedish material, and one made by R. Wiechmann (1996, pp. 41 f.) in the context of his work on the northern German hoards. Both systems consist of almost the same categories – fastening, body, and the form of the different wires. The main difference between the two systems is the absence of a category for finger-rings in the southern Swedish typology. The reason for this is the absence of complete finger-rings in that region. For the material from Schleswig-Holstein Wiechmann groups five different types of finger-rings – type A to E – but there is no more than one or two examples for each type of ring.

A still unsolved major problem is the dating of ring material. In the aforementioned works about Viking Age hack-silver hoards one can find different chronological systems for silver rings (cf. Grieg 1929; Skovmand 1942; Stenberger 1947, 1958; Hårdh 1976, 1996; Wiechmann 1996). These systems

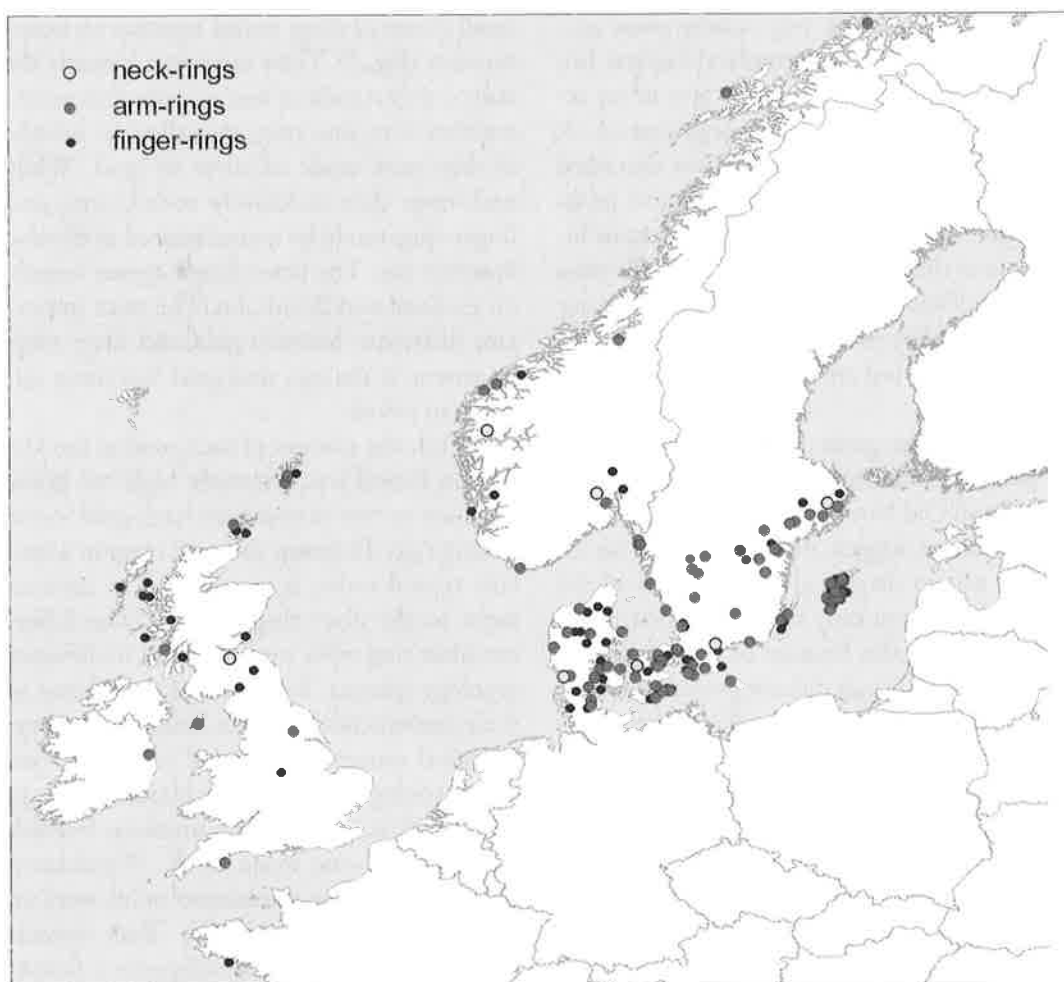


Fig. 1. Overall distribution of gold rings (n= 288).

were developed on the basis of coin material in the silver hoards, which makes the whole deposit datable. For gold hoards the case is much more difficult because almost all gold rings are found singly or together with other rings and are found without any datable material. Hence the only way to put them in a chronological framework is to compare them with silver rings. Therefore until now nearly all gold rings generally have to be dated to the 10<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> century. Apart from them, a large number of gold hoards have not been dated at all, and the only information given, especially for the British Isles, is “Viking Age” or

“Scandinavian type of ring”. Only two examples of gold hoards dated to the 9<sup>th</sup> century are known in Scandinavia hitherto.

One of them is the single arm-ring find from Råbylille, Denmark (Skovmand 1942, p. 36; Jørgensen & Vang Petersen 1998, p. 296; Wamers 2005, p. 157) (Fig. 3) which is a very special find because of its incised decoration. It bears a Christian symbol which is known from a large number of Christian manuscripts as well as from other ecclesiastical artefacts of the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> century (Jørgensen & Vang Petersen 1998, p. 296). The shape of the arm-ring is very rare in Viking Age Scandinavia.

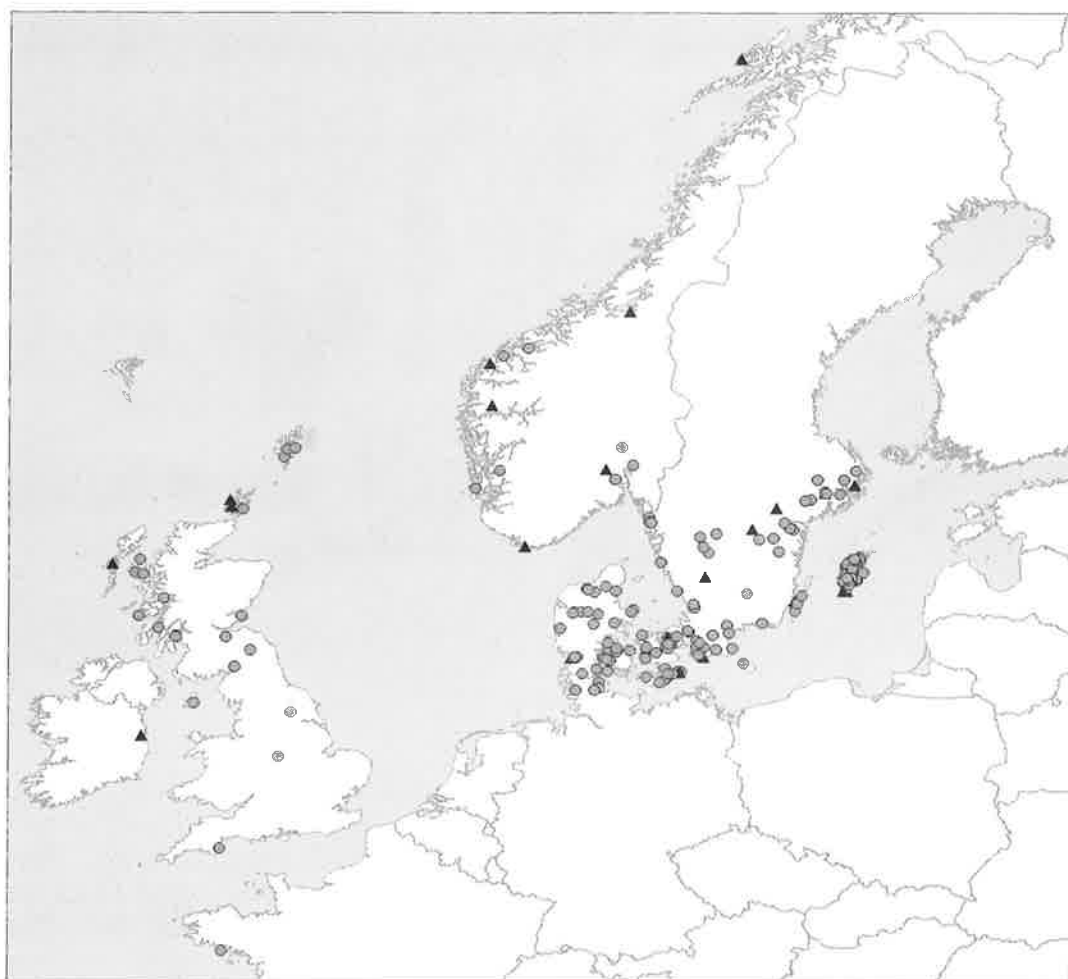


Fig. 2. Distribution of single finds (●) and hoard finds with more than one artefact (▲).

Only a small number of comparable silver arm-rings are known from Denmark, e.g. in the hoard from Tostrup on the isle of Møn (Skovmand 1942, p. 35). This type of ring, which dates to the 9<sup>th</sup> century, was made of a thin sheet of metal and could be described as flat bracelets rather than arm-rings.

The second 9<sup>th</sup>-century gold hoard is the one from Hoen, Norway (Fuglesang & Wilson 2006) (Fig. 4). Besides gold pendants, brooches and other gold objects, it contained two gold neck-rings, three gold arm-rings and two gold finger-rings. The character of this gold hoard has to be regarded as special, too,



Fig. 3. Gold ring from Råbylille, Denmark (Jørgensen & Vang Petersen 1998, p. 296).



Fig. 4. Hoard from Hoen, Norway (Fuglesang 2006, pl. 71).



Fig. 5. Gold ring from Bjørnkjærgård, Denmark (Jørgensen & Vang Petersen 1998, p. 295).

because of the mixture of many objects of different origin (Russia, France, Byzantium and of course Scandinavia) and with an impressive time span from the 4<sup>th</sup> century to the 9<sup>th</sup> century.

Summing up, there are a few but aggravating differences between Viking Age hack-silver hoards and gold hoards: first, gold

hoards consist mostly of only one ring (Fig. 5) (only 8 Scandinavian gold hoards consist of more than two rings), and second, these rings are always complete items.<sup>3</sup> This is the reason why Hårdh (1976, 1996) divided the southern Swedish material into two categories of finds of different function. She thinks of hack-silver hoards as commercial deposits and distinguishes them from the gold deposits.

### Distribution patterns in the Viking World

Regarding their distribution, most of the gold rings were found in Sweden with an overwhelming amount found on Gotland (Fig. 1) – which is a special case for Viking Age archaeology in many ways. Another factor in this picture of distribution is a critical assessment of sources: due to the excellent database from the Museum of National Antiquities in Stockholm, which makes it very easy to get a rather complete picture of the Swedish gold ring material. Another large concentration can be found on the Danish islands and a



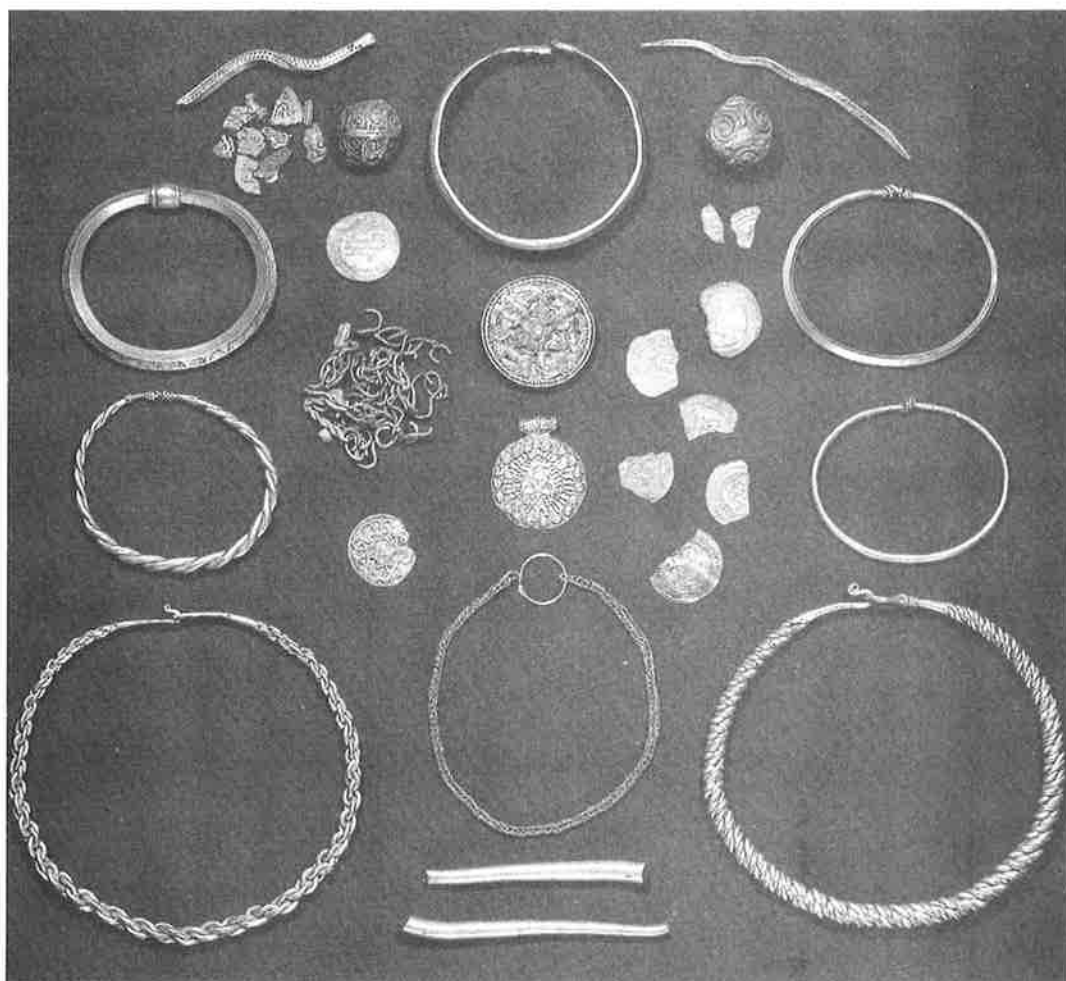


Fig. 6. Hoard from Vester Vedsted, Denmark (Jørgensen & Vang Petersen 1998, p. 298).

few examples exist in the British Isles and one special find is the gold finger-ring from the famous boat grave on the Ile de Groix, France (Müller-Wille 1978). Not only the distribution shows differences but also the combination of artefacts within the gold hoards, if there are more than one object. As mentioned before, nearly all gold hoards consist only of rings. Only a few examples combine other jewellery or coins with gold rings, such as Vester Vedsted, Denmark (Skovmand 1942, p. 71; Jørgensen & Vang Petersen 1998, p. 298) or Östra Torp No. 5, Sweden (Hårdh 1976, p. 75) (Fig. 6). All one can say at present is that

the number of finds with more than one gold object is higher in Denmark than in Sweden, Norway or the British Isles (Fig. 2). These regional differences in the composition of gold hoards will be one part of the ongoing work.

Remarkably, the number of finger-rings among the gold rings is very high, but the biggest group among Viking Age gold rings are arm-rings, the number of finger-rings is almost the same and the smallest group is the neck-rings (Fig. 1). Of a total of 288 rings, 136 examples are finger-rings. Again, the highest concentration can be found in Denmark and of course on Gotland. A few gold

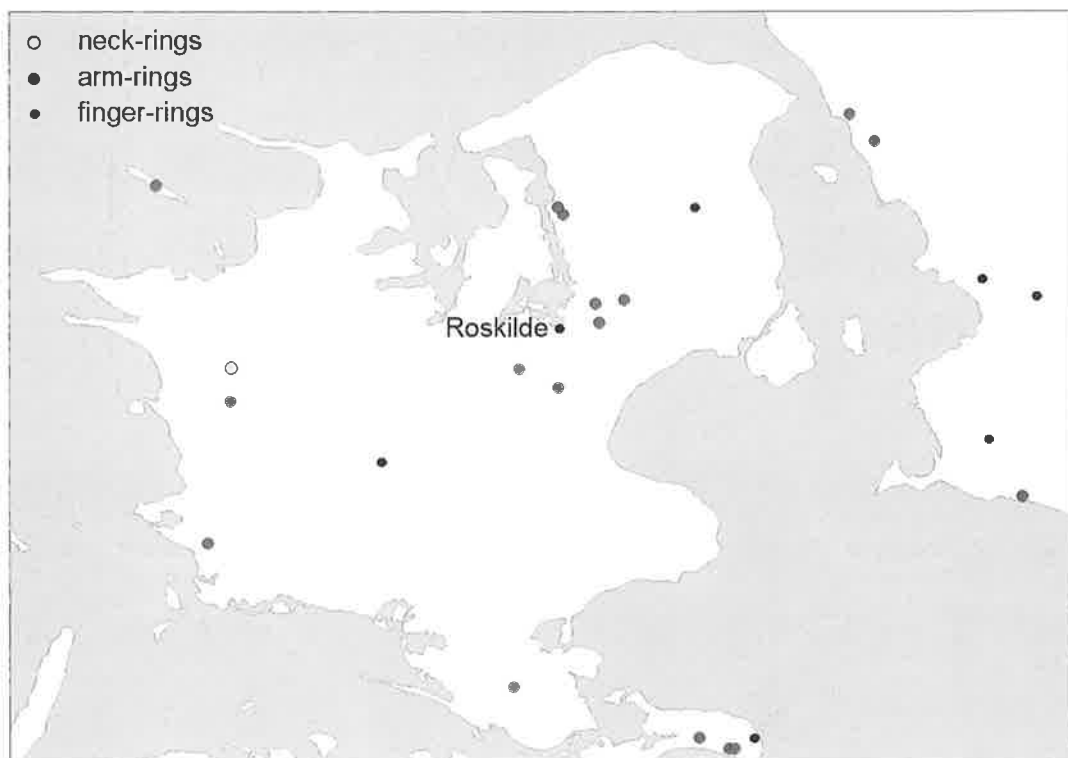


Fig. 7. Distribution of gold rings on Zealand, Denmark.

finger-rings were found on the Swedish mainland, in Norway and the British Isles.

The 141 known gold arm-rings show almost the same distribution pattern, with a high concentration on the Danish islands, especially Zealand. There seems to be another concentration of arm-rings in central Sweden and of course on Gotland. In some regions the distribution of gold rings makes up a proper pattern, as on Zealand with a high concentration of arm-rings around the Roskilde fjord (Fig. 7) in the immediate vicinity of the royal estate.

Patterns can be found within the distribution of neck-rings, too. There are only 9 known gold neck-rings in Scandinavia and the British Isles. Their distribution shows a regular spread all over Scandinavia (Fig. 8) next to important centres of the Viking Age.

At present it is not possible to say whether the divergent number of ring sizes could be

affected by possible different functions within a hierarchic rank system, or if it is just because of their size – a small finger ring is much easier to lose than an arm- or neck-ring.

#### **A profane approach: The symbol of the retainers?**

Based on the combination of written sources and the find context for the Roman Iron Age and Migration Period, it has been convincingly proven that gold arm-rings had a special meaning and that they were associated with military retinue systems. Regarding the potential of the Old Norse written sources, with many references to gold rings awarded by a ruler or even the king, and the astonishingly high number of Viking Age gold rings, it should now be promising to try to apply this method to the Viking Age.

S. Eisenschmidt (1994), and before her Steuer (1982), pointed out that the chamber



Fig. 8. Distribution of gold neck-rings (n= 9).

graves of the 10th century represent the next rank directly after the royal burials and hence should include the burials of the retainers of the king. The chamber graves are remarkably rich in construction and grave goods, e.g. drinking vessels, weapons and horse equipment, but there is none containing a ring – neither of gold nor of silver. Most of the chamber graves – synonymous with weapon graves – contain a sword or an axe. The latter are in some cases very richly decorated and hence seem to have formed a kind of “warrior symbol” (Petersen 2003, p. 157). Anyway, they obviously did not represent a retainer symbol in the specific way that the gold rings did as described in the Old Norse written sources.

As mentioned above, all Viking Age gold rings have been discovered in hoard contexts. Only five examples are known from grave contexts: one gold finger ring in the boat grave from the Ile de Groix in France (Müller-

Wille 1978, p. 53), one gold neck-ring in the man’s grave “Store Kongshøj” on the island of Mors, Denmark (Brøndsted 1936, pp. 88 f.) – not quite a neck ring but a pearl wire for a Thor’s hammer – and three gold finger-rings, all of them from women’s burials (Gammeljord, Hjørring (Brøndsted 1936, p. 82); Hovsør, Thisted (Brøndsted 1936, p. 87); Hald, Randers (Brøndsted 1936, pp. 95 f.)) from Denmark. The determination of the sex of the three “women’s burials” with gold finger-rings has to be considered very uncertain as grave goods are missing. The graves from Hovsør and Hald consist only of one ring with no other goods in combination. The burial from Gammeljord contained only one bead in addition. As a result it can be established that gold rings definitely do not appear where they should following the self-evident assumption: in the male burials of the retainers.

### A sacral approach: “odins law” or temple hoard?

In this context the latest work of C. Fabech (2006) could be of importance, as she dealt with some new aspects concerning the function of rings and ring deposits in the Viking Age. She worked out that central places of the Migration Period and Viking Age like Tissø (Jørgensen 2002) and Uppåkra (Larsson 2002), with their cult buildings and in some cases indications of sanctuaries (e.g. Borg in Östergötland, Fabech 2006, p. 27) represent the *harg* (Old Norse *hörgr*) and *hov* (Old Norse *hof*), which are described in the Old Norse sources. The reports about *hargs* and *hofs* often mention idols decorated with gold and silver rings as well as rings lying on top of altars.<sup>4</sup> These written sources seem very interesting with regard to some special Viking Age hoards, for example the one from Eketorp in Närke, Öland. This silver hoard was found in a swamp. It consists of two neck-rings, two arm-rings and two finger-rings amongst other silver jewellery. Some of the most interesting artefacts among them are some amulets – a miniature chair, a swordsman, a Thor’s hammer, a snake pendant and five strike-a-light pendants. The find context, the composition, and the time span of 300 years characterize the hoard as a very special find, which is not comparable with the typical hack-silver finds from the Viking Age. The amulets in particular allow us to assume a religious connection. The place where the hoard was found is right beside the nunnery of Rieseberga. Because of some Eskilstuna stone cists and a very early stone church, it is assumed that the area was converted to Christianity very early. Thus Fabech likes to think of the Eketorp find as a temple hoard. Perhaps the rings and amulets once lay on the altar and were used in pagan ceremonies. After the destruction of the pagan temple, the temple hoard was in danger of being used for commercial purposes. To safeguard the pieces, they might have been depos-

ited in the swamp. The find of Eketorp is very much comparable to the above-mentioned gold treasure from Hoen, Norway. Consisting of different pieces of jewellery, including two neck-rings, two arm-rings and a number of pendants, it is the biggest known Viking Age gold hoard. The time span of this hoard is even longer than the one of the Eketorp hoard, covering 500 years. The oldest piece from the Hoen treasure dates to the 4<sup>th</sup> century; the youngest to the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Originally thought to be a temple hoard (Holmboe 1835; Grieg 1929, p. 192), scholars now believe that this find has to be regarded as the treasure of a nobleman (Wilson 2006, 25). But the amalgamation of religious and secular pieces against the background of the written reports about “oath rings” and idols decorated with gold and silver rings allow us to assume that the Hoen hoard could perhaps be interpreted as a temple hoard, too.

The differentiation between commercial/profane treasures and sacral hoards in many cases is not distinct. One way of interpretation is to relate gold rings to “Odin’s law” (“you will enjoy in the afterlife what you have hidden when alive”). A large part of silver hoards can be seen in that context as accumulations of payment which were intended to be accessible in one’s afterlife. Consequently this would mean that the gold ring hoards would have to be regarded as commercial deposits, too. But C. Forsberg (1967/68) worked out that gold treasures seem to be too small to be considered as an accumulation of payment. Another argument that underlines her statement is the fact that gold artefacts were almost exclusively hidden separate from silver material. Hence it is much more likely that this is due to a different meaning. Fabech’s (2006) attempt opens up another way of interpreting at least some hoards, apart from looking at them as reversible treasures or as treasures in connection with Odin’s law. Especially gold hoards, which mainly consist of a small number of

rings, should be seen in connection with religious ceremonies. Most probably they were worn by the *goði* at religious ceremonies, for example to swear oaths on the ring. These gold rings could have passed down as parts of temple hoards which were hidden to protect them from destruction or commercial use in Christian times. Fabech (2006, 29 f.) would see many of the single finds of gold arm-rings in that special context, but the written and also the archaeological sources allow a lot more room for interpretation. As emphasized before, especially gold rings appear in more contexts than in connection with cult buildings and religious ceremonies in the Old Nordic sources. As a gift from the king/leader to his retainers, the ring is a symbol of solidarity in the gift-giving society (Hedeager 1994).

### Summary

Silver rings are mentioned in connection with the hack-silver economy but also in connection with sacral ceremonies and as part of temple hoards. Gold rings emerge in the context of sacral ceremonies even if it is not quite clear which form of rings were used. Furthermore, gold arm-rings and also finger-rings played a major role in the Nordic written sources as part of the retinue system. Gold and silver artefacts were combined only in a very few hoards,<sup>5</sup> due, one may assume, to a different intention in the deposition of gold and silver hoards. But the gold rings in the Viking Age might also have been a combination of both, as symbols of the retainers and awarded by the king, and could have combined profane and sacral function – even if not as temple hoards. The circumstances in which the gold rings were found – almost exclusively as single hoards and never chopped down to pieces – show that they were regarded in a different way from their silver counterparts. The absence of gold rings in graves rules out the function as a single personal piece of jewellery or part of the dress.

Since gold rings are not represented among grave goods and only appear in hoards or as single finds, one has to assume a kind of sacral function. The king as the one who awards the ring would then be the intermediary between the sacral sphere and his retainer, from whom he accepts a secular obligation. This would mean that especially the gold rings have to be seen at the same time in a sacral and profane context. Worn in the retainer's lifetime as a powerful symbol of his profane relationship to the king, the gold ring was at the same time a link to the metaphysical world through the act of awarding by the ruler as an intermediary with the sacral sphere.

### Notes

- 1 There is an ongoing discussion about the exact dating of this source. While the first part (stanzas 1–12) dates to the 9<sup>th</sup> century, K. von See (1961, 97) convincingly shows that the last part (from stanza 12 on) must be a later addition, which he assigns to the 12<sup>th</sup> century.
- 2 The stories of the Eddic poetry are placed in the time of the Migration Period, which makes it very difficult to use them as evidence for the Viking Age. Besides this chronological problem, it seems that the function of gold rings in Eddic poetry is different from that in the skaldic verses or the Icelandic sagas.
- 3 There are some very rare pieces of hack-gold in Viking Age treasures, too, for example in the hoard of Vester Vedsted near Ribe in Denmark. But because of the small amount in contrast to the silver material, one cannot speak of a regular and frequently appearance of hack-gold.
- 4 Fabech (2006, p. 27) quotes Hófstaðir as the best known example of such a *hov*-site. The cult building of Hófstaðir is described in the *Eyrbyggja saga* as a “large building

[...], and in the middle of the floor, a socle was placed, resembling an altar. On the socle lay a penannular ring on which oaths were sworn, and at all assemblies the *goði* of the *hov* had to wear it on his arm.”

- 5 For example in the hoard from Vester Vedsted, Denmark or the hoard from Östra Torp, Sweden.

## References

### Primary sources

- Harkv. *Haraldskvæði (Hrafnsmál)* by Þórbjörn hornklofi. In Jónsson, F. (ed.), *Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning* B1. *Rettet tekst med tolkning*. København-Kristiania.
- Heliand*. In Taeger, B. 1984, *Der Heliand. Studienausgabe in Auswahl. Altddeutsche Textbibliothek* 95. Tübingen
- Hildebrandslied*. In Schlosser, H. D. 2004, *Althochdeutsche Literatur. Auswahl mit Übertragungen und Kommentar*. Berlin.
- Tacitus. *Germania*. In Much, R. (ed.), *Die Germania des Tacitus*. Heidelberg.

### Secondary sources

- Bagge, S. 1991a. Headword: hirð. In *Lexikon des Mittelalters* V.
- 1991b. Headword: hirðskra. In *Lexikon des Mittelalters* V.
- Brøndsted, J. 1936. Danish inhumation graves of the Viking Age. *Acta Archaeologica* VII.
- v. Carnap-Bornheim, C. 1996. *Illerup Ådal 5. Die Prachtausrüstungen. Textband*. Aarhus.
- Eisenschmidt, S. 1994. *Kammergräber der Wikingerzeit in Altdänemark*. Bonn.
- Engeler, S. 1991. *Altnordische Geldwörter. Eine philologische Untersuchung altnordischer Geld- und Münzbezeichnungen und deren Verwendung in der Dichtung*. Frankfurt a.M.
- Fabech, C. 2006. Centrality in Old Norse mental landscapes. A dialogue between arranged and natural places? In Andrén, A., Jennbert, K. & Raudvere, C. (eds.), *Old Norse religion in long-term perspectives. Origins, changes, and interactions*. Lund.
- Forsberg, C. 1967/68. Ostergötlands vikingatida skattfynd. *Tor* 12.
- Fuglesang, S. H. & Wilson, D. M. (eds.) 2006. *The Hoen hoard. A Viking gold treasure of the*

- ninth century*. Norske Oldfynn XX. Oslo.
- Grieg, S. 1929. Vikingetidens Skattefund. In *Universitetets Oldsaksamlings Skrifter* II.
- Hårdh, B. 1976. *Wikingerzeitliche Depotfunde aus Südschweden. Probleme und Analysen (Katalog und Tafeln)*. Acta Archaeologica Lundensia Series in 4º, No. 9.
- 1996. *Silver in the Viking Age. A regional-economic study*. Stockholm.
- Hedeager, L. 1994. Warrior economy and trading economy in Viking Age Scandinavia. *Journal of European Archaeology* 2.1.
- Holmboe, C.A. 1835. *En mærkværdig samling af smykker, forstørstedelen af Guld, og Mynter fra det 8de og 9de Aarhundrede, fundne i August Maaned paa Gaarden Hoen, i Egers Præstegjeld i Agershuus Stift, i Norge*. Christiania.
- Jørgensen, L. 2002. Kongsgård-kultsted-marked. Overvejelser omkring Tissøkompleksets struktur og funktion. In Jennbert, K., Andrén, A. & Raudvere, C. (eds.), *Plats och Praxis – Studier av nordisk förkristen ritual*. Vägar till Midgård 2. Lund.
- Jørgensen, L. & Vang Petersen, P. 1998. *Guld, Magt og Tro. Danske skattefund fra oldtid og middelalder. Gold, Power and Belief. Danish gold treasures from Prehistory and the Middle Ages*. Copenhagen.
- Larsson, L. 2002. Uppåkra – Research on a Central Place. Recent Excavations and Results. In Hårdh, B. & Larsson, L. (eds.), *Central Places in the Migration and Merovingian Periods*. Uppåkrastudier 6. Lund.
- Lund-Hansen, U. 1998. Headword: Goldring. In Hoops, J. (ed.), *Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde* 12.
- 2001. Gold Rings-Symbols of Sex and Rank. In Magnus, B. (ed.), *Roman Gold and the Development of the Early Germanic Kingdoms. Aspects of technical, socio-political, socio-economic, artistic and intellectual development A.D. 1–550*. Stockholm.
- Müller-Wille, M. 1978. Das Schiffsgrab von der Ile de Groix (Bretagne). Ein Exkurs zum Bootkammergrab von Haithabu. *Berichte über die Ausgrabungen in Haithabu* 12. Schleswig.
- Pedersen, A. 2003. Reiche Bestattungen einer Aufbruchzeit – Tradition und Erneuerung in den Grabsitten des 10. Jahrhunderts in Altdänemark. *Mittelalterstudien* 3.
- von Sec, K. 1961. Studien zum Haraldskvæði. *Arkiv för Nordisk Filologi* 76.
- Skovmand, R. 1942. De danske Skattefund fra Vi-

- kingetiden og den ældste Middelalder indtil omkring 1150. *Aarbøger* 1942.
- Stenberger, M. 1947. *Die Schatzfunde Gotlands der Wikingerzeit 2. Fundbeschreibungen und Tafeln*. Stockholm.
- 1958. *Die Schatzfunde Gotlands der Wikingerzeit 1. Text*. Stockholm.
- Steuer, H. 1982. *Frühgeschichtliche Sozialstrukturen in Mitteleuropa*. Göttingen.
- 1987. Helm und Ringschwert. Prunkbewaffnung und Rangabzeichen germanischer Krieger. Eine Übersicht. *Studien zur Sachsenforschung* 6.
- 1998. Headword: Gefolgschaft, Archäologisches. In Hoops, J. (ed.), *Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde* 10.
- Strauch, D. 2006. Headword: Vitherlagsret. In Hoops, J. (ed.), *Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde* 32.
- Wamers, E. 2005. Imitatio imperii – Silber verändert den Norden. Novus David. In Wamers, E. & Brandt, M. (eds.), *Die Macht des Silbers. Karolingische Schätze im Norden* [Exhibition Archäologisches Museum Frankfurt & Dom-Museum Hildesheim 2005]. Regensburg.
- Wiechmann, R. 1996. Wikingerzeitliche Edelmetalldepots in Schleswig-Holstein. Vom Ringbrecher zur Münzwirtschaft. *Offa Bücher* 77.
- Wilson, D. M. 2006. Introduction and Summary. In Fuglesang, S. H. & Wilson, D. M. (eds.), *The Hoen hoard. A Viking gold treasure of the ninth century*. Norske Oldfynn XX. Oslo.