

Silver Currency Production

Silver is a precious metal which has a long significance in Scotland. During much of prehistory bronze, gold and iron were the principle metals traded and worked into tools and precious objects. During the Iron Age the Romans introduced silver to the local economy as a way of influencing trade and power by controlling its supply. Hoards of Roman silver coins have been found at numerous sites across Scotland.

In the Early Historic period coins were made in England but not in Scotland. Anglo-Saxon and English coins have been found in the north of Scotland, though, suggesting they had trade value.

In the Viking world, silver was the main precious metal and a form of currency, with objects, coins, fragments of objects (hacksilver) and casting scraps weighed on portable balances. Coins were only valued for their weight, not having any guaranteed buying power. This approach provided consistency across the vast areas the Vikings travelled and traded, although it also led to complications when different weight systems were used. Icelandic sagas written several hundred years later describe people using armrings to pay for expensive items, or even chopping them to roughly the required weight.



Jim Glazzard making ring-money



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Arabic coins spread to Scandinavia and the Viking world



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Below: The Viking hoard from Storr Rock, Skyes shows the mixture of silver bullion used by the Vikings

Simple silver jewellery and coins were made by beating silver ingots into shape using hammers and small anvils, usually made of iron or steel. Silver gets harder when it is beaten, so it needs to be periodically softened by heating it to a red-hot temperature. This heating process is called 'annealing'.

Silver can also be cast into more complex shapes (like penannular brooches) using clay moulds, with finer details hammered or punched in after casting.

Viking jewellery found throughout the Viking world shows the sophisticated skills of the smiths. There is even a Viking period toolchest which survives from the Swedish island of Gotland showing the tools the smiths used.

See also:

Box 3 object sheets: Viking Ring Money and Arabic Coins
When? Vikings and Norse

Additional Images: Map of the Viking World, Viking Silver Hoard from Storr Rock, Skye

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