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Silver reveals luxury tastes of Vikings and trade talents of ancient Greeks

The precious metal's role as far back as antiquity offers a window into the rise and fall of past civilisations.

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Vikings, traditionally depicted as primitive bearded warriors, had a fondness for some of life's precious things. In Europe, hundreds of buried hoards of silver testify to its attraction for Vikings when they lived more than 1 000 years ago.

'Clearly they loved the stuff,' said Dr Jane Kershaw, an archaeologist at the University of Oxford in the UK. 'It's one of the few tangible things that survives from that age.'

Rich history

Silver was already regarded as a precious metal by the time the 300-year-long Viking era began in Scandinavia in about 750 AD. It was prized above gold in ancient Egypt as far back as the 4th millennium BC and used in coins by Lydians, inhabitants of western Asia Minor, in the 6th century BC.

Looking at silver's past through the ages offers insights into the movements and evolution of ancient civilisations as well as into the origins of money. It's even beginning to transform some long-held views about past peoples.

As head of a research project that received EU funding to assess the role of silver in the lives of Vikings, Kershaw is questioning the traditional portrayal of them simply as fearsome invaders in western Europe.

She said the Vikings were strongly influenced by the Golden Age of Islam, which also began in the 8th century AD.

'We have found little evidence for Vikings acquiring loot through violent raids in the West,' Kershaw said. 'Instead, the quest for Islamic silver was the huge driver of the Viking Age.'

Her research project, called SILVER, got underway in March 2019 and is due to run into 2024. It also involves Dr Stephen Merkel, an Earth sciences expert at the Free University of Amsterdam in the Netherlands and a coin specialist named Jani Oravisjärvi at the University of Oulu in Finland.

'Cultural chameleons'

The three researchers have analysed trace metals, including lead found in silver coins gathered from museums, using lasers for micro-sampling.

Examining different variants – or isotopes – of lead helped to shed light on the source ores and, with it, to provide new information on the origins of the Viking Age.

The conventional wisdom has been that the era of the Vikings began with an attack in 793 AD against the island of Lindisfarne off the northeastern coast of England and that they developed trading links with the Islamic caliphates only in the 10th century.

But a large proportion of Islamic silver found in the treasure hoards covered by Kershaw's investigations suggests the Vikings may have headed eastwards much earlier – from around 750 AD. They then formed extensive global trade routes eastwards and southwards while expanding in western Europe.

'These trade networks run from North Africa to Baghdad, across the Caspian Sea, up through Ukraine and Russia, to the Baltic Sea and Scandinavia,' said Kershaw. 'That's a vast arc of silver flowing one way and goods and people flowing in the other direction already in the 9th century.'

She said this information also reveals the Vikings to have been 'cultural chameleons'.

Apart from putting a fresh focus on the Vikings' eastern expansion, Kershaw wants her team's studies to inform other research into the history of civilisations.

'I hope it will make people reassess the early stages of Viking raiding in Europe,' she said. 'I also hope people will take the methods and apply them to their own area of research.'

Money matters

That's just what another EU-funded project is doing.

Also called SILVER, it has been looking further back to ancient empires in the Mediterranean region, including Greece, Persia and Rome, to shed light on the history of money and trade.

The project, which is scheduled to wrap up in March 2024 after six and a half years, is led by Professor Francis Albarède, a geochemist at the École Normale Supérieure in Lyon, France.

After analysing lead and silver isotopes, Albarède argues that the minting of silver into coins in the Mediterranean area paved the way for the formation of democracies in the 5th century BC.

'I believe silver was crucial in the invention of democracy because it helped people to be heard and understood,' he said.

Mercenary voices

Evidence suggests the Achaemenid Empire in Persia used silver coins to hire large armies of Greek infantrymen as mercenaries, according to Albarède.

He said that, after these “hoplites” returned home with plenty of money, they formed an ambitious middle class that aided the spread of democracy.

The mercenaries also redistributed silver around the Mediterranean. That’s the only way to explain excesses of the metal in non-silver-producing states around the Aegean Sea and coastal areas of southern Italy colonised by ancient Greeks, according to Albarède.

‘You see that silver is lubricating long-distance exchange,’ he said.

His team also found that silver-mining areas in ancient times were more widespread than previously thought. Meanwhile, by 480 BC, the Lavrion silver mines near Athens established the modern-day capital as Greece’s leading power, contributing to its role as an eastern Mediterranean monetary hub.

Past-to-present lessons

The researchers found a way to trace the metal’s origins using silver isotopes in addition to lead ones.

This endeavour was previously tricky because silver-isotope ratios in coins differed too little to distinguish the source mines.

But when Albarède’s team instead examined ores before conversion into coins, it found much bigger differences. This enabled the researchers to rule out particular mines as origins of bulk silver.

‘Lead isotopes tell you the potential sources of silver and silver isotopes where it cannot come from,’ said Albarède. ‘Putting the two together, you get a better idea of which sources are possibilities.’

Besides Lavrion, the possible sources include the Halikidi region of northern Greece and the islands of Thassos, Sifnos and Evia.

His team is also gaining insights into the reasons that people first minted coins. Its view is that, thanks to being resistant to decay, relatively light and less valuable than gold, silver coins were crucial in accelerating transactions.

‘Minting coins improves what people call the velocity of money and frees you from the tyranny of weight,’ Albarède said. ‘During crises like war, that’s critical.’

He believes the past can offer lessons for contemporary societies, citing intrinsic links between monetary and trading systems. For example, the Greeks turned to Egypt for wheat in exchange for silver when their soils became degraded.

Albarède sees another connection between the past and present: the persistence of societal inequalities and their destabilising effects.

‘We should look to the disasters of ancient societies and their social conclusions for lessons,’ he said.

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