FLORENT AUDY

Pierced coins in Viking-Age Scandinavia: problems of interpretation

The pierced coin illustrated in Figure 1 is a German coin minted in Cologne during the imperial rule of Otto I or II. It was found in grave 6 at Nytorp, Swedish province of Uppland (Audy 2018:310). The position of the coin in this grave, close to several beads, suggests that it was originally suspended from a necklace. This hypothesis is further supported by the distinctive edge wear close to the two holes, wear caused by the rubbing of the coin against the hard beads with which it was suspended.

In this case, there can be no doubt that the holes were made in order to wear the coin as a dress accessory. Two types of evidence combine: the position of the coin in the grave or 'contextual evidence'; the secondary features of the coin or 'physical evidence'. The problem is that most of the contexts in which the Viking-Age pierced coins occur are of little help in determining how these objects were previously used. In hoards, for instance, they are frequently mixed together with all kinds of valuables, including unmodified coins, ingots and fragmented ornaments. All that mattered to the hoarder was the amount of silver deposited, regardless of the original function of the objects. How then can we be sure that these coins were pierced for the same reason as the coin illustrated in Figure 1?

Holes in coins are difficult to interpret. On the one hand, the number of possible interpretations is wider than may at first appear. Holes can serve as means of suspension for coin-pendants, but their presence can be explained in many other ways, such as demonetization, testing or convenience. It is important to evaluate these alternative explanations as well. On the other hand, the possibilities of interpretation are very limited due to the simplicity of this element. Holes are too simple to provide much information. The only physical features that can be investigated are the following: number, shape and positioning. When the context does not point clearly in one direction, this is often insufficient to determine how a hole was originally used.[1]

Fig. 1. German coin of Otto I or II (962–983) found in grave 6 at Nytorp, Uppland. KMK dnr 173/83. Scale 1.5:1.

That holes in coins are so simple also makes it very difficult to reconstruct the context of modification. How to determine where and when the holes were made in the absence of distinctive typological features? The impossibility – or quasi-impossibility – to reconstruct the context of modification is particularly problematic here, because most of the coins available in Viking-Age Scandinavia were imported from abroad. The

[1] Moreover, it is often impossible to tell whether a hole was intended to function independently or in conjunction with now-disappeared elements. A good example of this is provided by a pierced dirham from the cemetery at Tuna, Swedish province of Uppland. This Abbasid coin, minted in AD 766/7, is provided with a round hole which may have functioned directly as a means of suspension, but the presence of seven looped coins in the same grave could also suggest that this hole was actually intended to attach a now-disappeared loop (Audy 2018:306–7).

Fig. 2. English coin of Alfred the Great (871–899) found in grave 20 at Rimforsa, Östergötland. SHM 15413. Scale 1.5:1.

presence of pierced coins in Scandinavia must be interpreted in different ways depending on whether the holes were made locally or not.

The aim of this paper is to answer the three following questions. Were all the pierced coins used in Viking-Age Scandinavia meant to be suspended? Were they all meant to have an ornamental function? Were they all modified in Scandinavia or were some of them already pierced when arriving? Answering these three questions will help us to understand the motivations of those who pierced coins and the role played by coin piercing within the 'coin-pendant' phenomenon.

Holes as means of suspension?

Coins can be pierced for many reasons other than suspension, the best documented of which is probably demonetization. Piercing a coin, often centrally, has long been used as a way to emphasize its invalidity in currency (see e.g. Kelleher 2013:241–2). Thus, in several written sources from medieval France, we are told how the kings ordered the piercing of all the coins that were not valid on the market, either because they were too old, foreign or counterfeited (see Blanchet 1953; Vuitry 1879:47). Unsurprisingly, only few of these centrally-pierced coins have come to us. It can be assumed that they were, as a rule, melted down soon after they were demonetized.[2]

Various utilitarian adaptations involving coin piercing are also attested at different times and in various places. Here is a selection of the types of adaptations that can be encountered. In the Roman world, some pierced coins seem to have been incorporated into baby rattles (Perassi 2011: 284–7). It was probably the metallic sound of the object that motivated such a reuse. In medieval Europe, those sealing charters sometimes attached one or several pierced coins at the bottom of the document. These pierced coins may have had an authentication function similar to that of seals, as well as a particular symbolic function (Dhénin 1993:618–20). In the area of Nice, southern France, a juggling game called 'pilou' is played with a pierced coin adapted into a shuttlecock using folded paper. The shuttlecock is usually made with French centimes from the beginning of the twentieth century, since these coins were minted with a central hole.[3] Clearly, the different adaptions illustrated here show that coins could be reused for numerous reasons, including need for small metal pieces or for ornamented objects.

How then can we recognize that a pierced coin was originally modified to be suspended? The best way to determine whether the hole made in a coin was intended for suspension is to look at its positioning. As argued by Richard Kelleher (2013:237), a hole positioned somewhere on the outer circumference of a coin is strongly indicative of a conversion into an object for suspension. A good example of this is provided by the German coin found in grave 6 at Nytorp (Figure 1), the ornamental function of which is beyond doubt. In this case, the round holes were made very close to the edge, about one millimeter away from the outer circumference.

The Nytorp example is not an isolated one. In his thesis on coin reuse in Viking-Age Scandinavia (Audy 2018), the present author examined a representative sample of about 1000 pierced coins found in graves and hoards. This large sample

[2] It should be stressed that the absence of coherent monetary system in Viking-Age Scandinavia until the very end of the period makes it very unlikely that there were coins pierced for demonetization there.

[3] The coins used to play 'pilou' are not modified stricto sensu, but they offer a very good example of radical repurposing. For more information on this game, see: http://sitedepilou.free.fr/la_fabrication_du_pilou.htm

Fig. 3. Samanid coin of Nasr b. Ahmad (914/5) found in the Kannikegærdet hoard, Bornholm. MS FP 6083. Scale 1.5:1.

provides an unambiguous picture: almost all the holes made in coins were positioned somewhere on their outer circumference.

There are some exceptions, though. A Carolingian coin found at Aggersborg, Danish province of Jutland, was pierced many times all over its surface. Because this multiple piercing resembles a mutilation, it was suggested that the coin was the target of 'anti-Christian sentiments' (Moesgaard 2004:17; Garipzanov 2008:74). An Anglo-Saxon coin found in grave 20 at Rimforsa, Swedish province of Östergötland, was provided with a single central hole (Figure 2). The function of this hole is unknown, but may be related to an Anglo-Saxon practice (see Screen 2014:352).

Despite these few exceptions, there are good reasons to think that the overwhelming majority of the pierced coins from Viking-Age Scandinavia were modified to be suspended. The almost systematic positioning of the hole on the outer conference of the coins strongly points in this direction.

Holes as indicators of an ornamental reuse?

Adapting a coin for suspension does not necessarily mean that the coin was intended to function as an ornament. Very practical reasons can also be advanced to explain this type of modification. Cécile Morrisson (1980:242) argues that some very light *minimi* circulating in North Africa in the sixth century were pierced by their owners to string together a fixed number of coins, thus facilitating their use in transactions. The square hole in the centre of the Chinese cash coins, though made already at the time of minting, had a similar function. In such cases, the piercing of coins was clearly a matter of convenience.

A Migration period hoard found in 1905 at Hässelstad, Swedish province of Småland (SHM 12457), is worth mentioning here, even if this hoard was deposited long before the beginning of the Viking period. There were nine late Roman *solidi* – including imitations of Roman *solidi* – in the Hässelstad hoard, seven of which were pierced. When discovered, the seven pierced *solidi* were piled on top of each other, while the two unpierced ones were lying on the side. This special arrangement, with a clear separation between pierced and unpierced coins in a non-ornamental context, could suggest that the pierced specimens were originally strung together for safe-keeping.

In Viking-Age Scandinavia, there is no positive evidence suggesting that coins could be pierced for reasons other than ornamental reuse. If the holes had been made to facilitate transportation or exchange, then we could expect the pierced coins to occur as groups in non-ornamental contexts, as in the Hässelstad example. This is not the case. In Viking-Age graves, the pierced coins are almost always found in the neck/chest area and combined with other pendants (Audy 2018:281–317). In Viking-Age hoards, or at least in the few hoards that have been stratigraphically excavated, they are mixed with the other silver objects deposited (see e.g. KMK 101844).

The Kannikegærdet hoard, Danish island of Bornholm, with its unusually high proportion of pierced coins, represents an interesting case. This mixed hoard was recovered in 1995 by archaeologists from the local museum, following the discovery of several coins by an amateur detectorist. It contained 49 Islamic dirhams with a *terminus post quem* of 940/1, as well as a complete armband and some pieces of hack-silver. Of the 49 coins deposited in this hoard, 36 were pierced, i.e. almost 75 percent of them. This contrasts strongly

with the proportion of coin piercing observed in other tenth-century hoards, which is usually below six percent (Audy 2018:63). Also striking is the fact that many of the coins from the Kannikegærdet hoard are crudely pierced, with a large number of three-sided holes (Figure 3). Three-sided holes could be made by anyone owning a knife, while other types of holes required special tools (Audy 2018:97–9). Can these different features indicate that the coins from Kannikegærdet were originally pierced for economic reasons? Probably not: the hoard also contained four looped coins, the ornamental function of which is beyond question.[4] It is more likely that the pierced and looped coins from Kannikegærdet formed part of the same ornamental set.

Further evidence that the pierced coins from the Viking-Age were not suspended for economic reasons is provided by blank flans. These unstruck coins, which seem to have been imported both from the East and the West, were used within the Viking-Age bullion economy in the exact same way as the struck ones: many of them show secondary treatment, including test marking and fragmentation. The only type of secondary treatment that the unstruck coins almost never show is piercing, thus confirming that this modification was not economically motivated (Audy 2018:45).

Based on these different observations, it can be concluded that the overwhelming majority of the Viking-Age coins provided with a hole were worn, at least for some time, as ornamental pendants, even when this is not reflected in the depositional context. The presence of many coins with holes in contexts where they seem to have an economic function, for instance in mixed hoards, must be explained by the capacity of pierced coins to regain a currency role at a later stage in their lives (Audy 2018:156–7).

Pierced coins outside Scandinavia

To understand the role played by pierced coins in Viking-Age Scandinavia, it is necessary to reconstruct the context in which the coins were modified. If the coins were turned into pendants in Scandinavia, then it is certain that they were used as pendants there. If the coins were turned into pendants abroad, then it is possible that they had already regained a currency role when imported. Because holes are too simple to provide much information, the only way to answer this question is to investigate the practice of coin piercing outside Scandinavia, and more specifically in the areas from which the coins were imported, such as the Carolingian empire, England, Germany, Byzantium and the Islamic caliphates. It is also necessary to investigate some of the areas through which the coins imported to Scandinavia travelled.

Piercing coins for suspension and/or ornamental use is not common in Western Europe at that time. A number of pierced coins have been found, but they are the exception rather than the rule. In late Anglo-Saxon England, coin modification is almost exclusively represented by a small group of coin brooches (Williams 2001). The only pierced coins found there seem to occur in contexts where the Scandinavian presence is evident (Screen 2014:350–3). The practice of coin piercing is not more common in the Carolingian empire and in Ottonian Germany. Here too, coin-brooches predominate among the few modified coins (Berghaus 1994; Schulze-Dörrlamm 1999). Under these circumstances, it can be assumed that none – or almost none – of the Western coins imported to Scandinavia were pierced before they ended up in Viking hands.

An interesting illustration of this is provided by the site of Havsmarken, Danish island of Ærø, which has yielded 52 Carolingian coins since its discovery in 2008. The many single finds of Carolingian coins at Havsmarken have been interpreted as evidence that this market site served as one of their gateways to Denmark. It was probably trade that brought all of them there (Moesgaard MS). At Havsmarken, only one of the 52 Carolingian coins has been pierced for suspension. This contrasts markedly with the rest of Denmark, where about two-thirds of the known Carolingian coins show signs of reuse as pendants (see Garipzanov 2008). The quasi-absence of Carolingian coins with holes at a gateway of this kind indicates that piercing did not occur before the coins began circulating in Scandinavia.

In the East, on the other hand, coin piercing was common practice during the Viking period. Coins with holes were very much appreciated among the Rus' (see e.g. Ravdina 1988), whose practice cannot really be dissociated from the Scandinavian one. The Rus' material culture has indeed a strong Scandinavian base. Coins with holes were also

[4] The types of loops used to suspend coins in the Viking Age are also used to suspend all kinds of ornamental pendants, such as cross-shaped pendants and shield-shaped pendants (see Audy 2018:107). Looped coins clearly belong to the same ornamental group as these pendants.

much appreciated among the Finnish, Slavic and Hungarian tribes (see e.g. Belyakov 1990; Talvio 2000). A good example of this is provided by the cemetery at Pleshkovo, which belonged to the Finnish Meryan tribe. This cemetery consisting of about 60 graves has yielded 22 coins turned into pendants, including ten pierced coins (Belyakov 1990:37–40).

Further south, the use of pierced coins is well attested in Byzantium, where these objects remained fashionable for centuries. Pierced coins rarely occur in Byzantine hoards, but several sources – mainly historical – confirm that coins could be modified to be used as Christian amulets (see Audy 2018:197), such as a discourse by John Chrysostom (†407) and a letter by Michael Italikos (†1157). A pierced coin of Justinian (527–565) is carved with the Greek inscription 'Christ protect the bearer', leaving no doubt about the apotropaic function of this object (Fulghum 2001). In Byzantium, the fashion for reused coins seems to have led to the production of numerous coin-like pendants, most of which were cast and pierced (see Morrisson & Bendall 2011).

At that time, coin piercing is an ongoing phenomenon in the Islamic world as well. A ninth-century hoard discovered at Susa, for instance, contained eleven pierced coins, which is equivalent to about one per cent of the total material (see Miles 1960). A tenth-century hoard discovered in the Isfahan region contained six pierced coins, which is also equivalent to about one per cent of the total material (see Lowick 1975). It is usually assumed that coins were pierced in the Islamic world to be worn as ornaments (Miles 1960:139; Lowick 1975:118).

A significant number of pierced coins were certainly present among the Eastern coins imported to Scandinavia. These coins came from territories where coin piercing was popular and travelled through territories where this practice was even more popular. Unfortunately, it is impossible to evaluate precisely the proportion of Eastern coins that were already pierced when imported. This probably varied from one batch to another, depending on how the coins were brought to Scandinavia: source of supply, number of stops on the way and identity of the intermediaries. After the arrival of the Eastern coins, the frequency of piercing is believed to have increased significantly, provided how popular the practice was in Scandinavia. The number of Eastern pierced coins found in ornamental contexts there (Audy 2018:163–5) strongly supports the idea that they were also frequently modified locally.

In conclusion, there are good reasons to think that most of the pierced coins present in Viking-Age Scandinavia were modified to be worn as pendants and that this modification usually occurred locally. Several arguments have been put forward: positioning of the holes on the outer circumference, absence of contextual evidence supporting the 'convenience/economic' hypothesis and limited importance of coin piercing in many areas from which the coins were imported.

Of course, a proportion of pierced coins deviate from this norm, the main factor being the frequent piercing of coins in the East. However, the existence of these deviating cases is not expected to alter significantly the general picture: it seems that the presence of pierced coins in Viking-Age Scandinavia can be studied as an integral part of the Scandinavian 'coin-pendant' phenomenon (see Audy 2018).

Illustrations

All photographs by the author.

Svensk sammanfattning

Artikeln behandlar fenomenet hål i mynt under vikingatiden. Syftet är att avgöra om alla de vikingatida mynten med hål som hittats i Skandinavien brukats lokalt som hänge eller inte. Genomborrades alla mynten för prydnadsändamål? Var en del av de utländska mynten genomborrade innan de importerades? En analys av de genomborrade myntens egenskaper visar att de flesta av dessa föremål kan placeras i kategorin 'skandinaviska mynthängen'.