Stycas, kings and Vikings: the copper-alloy revolution in 9th-century England

WRoCAH funded Collaborative Doctoral Award between Department Archaeology at the University of York, and the York Museums Trust (The Yorkshire Museum)

Lead Academic and Partner Organisation Supervisors

Prof Dawn Hadley
Archaeology
University of York

Dr Andrew Woods
Senior Curator
York Museums Trust (the Yorkshire Museum)

Project summary
This project will explore the manufacture, use and distribution of 9th-century copper-alloy coins called stycas, minted in the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Northumbria. The supervisors are Dawn Hadley (archaeologist, Vikings specialist, and currently studying the Viking ‘Great Army’ at Torksey) and Andrew Woods (Senior Curator at the Yorkshire Museum, with a specialism in early medieval coinage). Recent research has the need for a reappraisal of this coinage, which has much to reveal about the impact of the Vikings on England and its economy. The student will gain experience of working in a museum, contributing to public understanding of a nationally significant collection.

Project description
Minted in the 9th-century kingdom of Northumbria, to replace its previous silver coinage, copper-alloy stycas are the most common early medieval English coins, and found in vast quantities. It is usually argued that by c.860, after repeated Viking attacks, Northumbrian kings ceased minting coins, and stycas fell out of use. When minting resumed c.900 it was in silver by Viking kings in York. However, recent research (e.g. by Andrew Woods and Gareth Williams) now suggests that stycas may have continued to be both used, and possibly even minted, into the late 9th century; hundreds have recently turned up in tightly-dated, metal-detected assemblages linked to the Viking ‘Great Army’ that raided England in the late 860s/870s (e.g. the documented winter camp at Torksey, Lincs; Talnotrie hoard, Scot). The Army seems to have used stycas for trade/exchange, and perhaps as raw material from which to make jewellery; copper-alloy ingots are being found alongside stycas suggesting some had been melted down. Moreover, there is growing evidence for the Army ‘imitating’ stycas; suggested by the almost illiterate legends of many, revealing lack of control over literacy in contrast to official Northumbrian

If you are selected by the CDA project team to be put forward to WRoCAH, your application will be considered competitively within the main WRoCAH competition. Being put forward for consideration is not a guarantee of funding.
coins. In this respect imitative stycas presage the first silver coins minted by Viking kings, c.900. The implications of this new evidence are profound. Stycas provide essential dating evidence for the 9th century in northern England; but we appear to have been dating key sites far earlier than they may have been. Thus, we have the potential to fill a perceived gap in the 9th-century archaeological and historical record. This is highly significant for understanding a period of immense change, as Vikings raided and conquered the kingdom of Northumbria, transforming its economy. Key initial questions to address are: 1) how long did the Northumbrians continue to mint stycas and what changes occur in late issues; 2) how long did stycas continue to circulate; 3) when, and on what scale, did the Vikings mint imitations of stycas; 4) what other evidence exists for the use of copper alloy as a medium of exchange for the Vikings?

A grounding for the research lies in the late Elizabeth Pirie’s published styca catalogue (1996); an excellent resource for the many dies used to mint this highly innovative coinage, but now out of date concerning their historical context. A student could choose to focus on one or more of the following themes to suit their interests: 1) coinage as a medium of kingship/authority; 2) the role of copper alloy in the Viking economy to complement traditional focus on silver; 3) use of imagery and literacy; 4) analysis of specific assemblages (such as hoards from York & Bolton Percy held by the Yorkshire Museum and the styca assemblage from the Viking winter camp at Torksey); 5) analysis of combinations, and distribution, of pairs of dies used to mint obverse/reverse of stycas to refine when/where they were minted, which moneyers were involved, and in the name of which kings (both named on the coins); 6) access to a portable XRF machine can be arranged to test metal content of stycas to assess production methods and refine chronologies; 7) examination of styca collections beyond Northumbria (e.g. from trading sites) to illuminate use of copper alloy across the Viking world. The student will spend an average of a day a week based at the Museum in the first 2 years to work on the collections; towards the end of Y2 they will undertake a placement to work with the museum on outreach enhancement.

About Yorkshire Museums Trust

The archaeology and numismatic collection of YMT is designated by Arts Council England as being of National Importance (https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/publication/designated-outstanding-collections). This designation takes particular note of the Anglo-Saxon metalwork, and within that collection, the 9th-century styca collection represents one of the key highlights (York Museums Trust Collections Development Policy 2015). It is the reference collection of this type of material, a collection unparalleled in any other museum in England. Within the large numismatic collection, it represents a unique group of material. The styca collection has been comprehensively published by Pirie (1996) but in such a way that its interpretation is very difficult. It has not undergone modern investigation which allows for the nature of its production or use to be understood and communicated. As such, it is highly challenging for the museum to use in its displays and has only occasionally made it into exhibitions over the past two decades. As such, any research which would enable a better understanding would contribute significantly to the YMT goal of excellent programming on the basis of new research.
Arts Council England awarded YMT National Portfolio Organisation status in 2018. This comes with a commitment to regional leadership. The Yorkshire Museum is one of a very small number of regional museums with a specialist archaeologist and the only museum to have a staff member with specific responsibility and oversight over the numismatic collection. It is thus a strategic aim to maximise this specialism through research, as well as sharing with the public and also the curatorial and Front of House team the results and techniques learned from this project.

**Engagement, outreach, dissemination and impact opportunities**

There are many opportunities for the student to engage in externally-facing activities and there would be capacity for the student to work with the supervisory team and museum staff to shape a programme of activity that meets their needs and interests. Prospective outputs and activities can be categorised under four headings:

1. **Documentation**
   - Enhance the museum’s records with high-resolution digital imagery for the coins in the collection, which will be of research and dissemination value for museum staff as well as the student

2. **Digital Outputs**
   - New imagery and information can be released online via the museum’s collection online (https://www.yorkmuseumstrust.org.uk/collections/)
   - Uploading of relevant imagery to Wikimedia commons (50 coins already uploaded receive >4,000,000 views per month).

3. **Programme and Talks at the museum**
   - Delivery of ‘Curator’s talk’ as a part of regular museum programming
   - Organise a symposium on early medieval coinage

4. **Display and Exhibition**
   - Temporary display in Yorkshire Museum at culmination of project
   - Creation of AV content to be included in redisplay within permanent galleries
   - Ideally, the research would feed into an exhibition focused on the Anglo-Saxon period

While some of these activities (e.g. creating digital images) can be undertaken across a long period of work, others (which could be tailored to the student’s interests) would require a focussed placement in the museum to work alongside the curatorial team. We would anticipate that this would take place late in the second year of the thesis. We would work with the student on display, training them in how to transform their research into interpretation for the public. This would be seen by >100,000 people per annum. This would offer an array of transferable skills for the museum sector in general, which might also be valuable for the impact aspects of academic work.

In 2022, the museum will open a new gallery celebrating the 200-year-old history of the collections, and their potential for research and interpretation in the twenty-first century. The outcomes of the proposed PhD project would be utilised within this display, connecting collections recovered in the nineteenth century with the newest archaeological techniques to offer new interpretations on a crucial period in York’s history.
Other Partner Organisations

The PhD would represent a collaborative undertaking between supervisors in the Department of Archaeology, University of York and the Yorkshire Museum (part of the Yorkshire Museums Trust). However, while there are currently no other partner organisations identified, as noted in the project proposal depending on how the student’s interests developed they may wish to access collections at other museums. In particular, the collections held in a number of Scandinavian museums would be relevant if the student wanted to look at the collections of stycas from overseas Viking Age trading sites.

Financial support and eligibility

Full-time AHRC Competition Studentships for doctoral research are 3 years in duration (or 6 years part time). Awards are subject to satisfactory academic progress. Awards must be taken up in October 2019. No deferrals are possible. Awards will comprise UK/EU fees at Research Council rates and, for eligible students, a maintenance grant (£14,777 in 2017/8).

Please note that all applicants should meet the AHRC’s academic criteria and residency requirements (http://wrocah.ac.uk/new-student/2019-cda/).

How to apply

Before applying for any WRoCAH Studentship, please first ensure that you have read the WRoCAH webpages about Collaborative Doctoral Awards, the WRoCAH training programme and requirements http://wrocah.ac.uk/new-student/2019-cda/

Please note that the selection of Collaborative Doctoral Award applicants is a two stage process:

STAGE 1

Expressions of interest to be sent to Dawn Hadley (dawn.hadley@york.ac.uk) by 1 December 2018.

Deadline for STAGE 1 applications

1 December 2018

Date of interviews

13 December 2019

STAGE 2
Apply for funding to WRoCAH

Candidates selected after Stage 1 then liaise with the project supervisory team to submit a WRoCAH studentship application via the WRoCAH online application form by the 5pm on Wednesday 23 January 2019 deadline.

NB: Candidates who have been unsuccessful in Stage 1 can submit a separate WRoCAH application as a non-CDA applicant.

For more information contact

Prof Dawn Hadley (Dawn.Hadley@york.ac.uk)