

The first major silver crisis in Russia and the Baltic, c. 875-c. 900

By Thomas S. Noonan

It has long been known that, around 970, a sharp decline took place in the export of Islamic silver coins or dirhams to Russia and the Baltic (1). Furthermore, it has also been established that the importation of dirhams into Russia came to an end about 1015 (2). The cessation of dirham exports into Russia and the Baltic at this time has been connected with what has been called the silver crisis within the Islamic world, i.e., the severe drop in the coinage of silver and the pronounced debasement of those few silver coins which were struck. While scholars have debated the causes as well as the consequences of this silver crisis, (3), and some have even questioned whether it existed (4), there can be no doubt that the monetary history of Russia and the Baltic were profoundly impacted by the end of dirham imports.

While the silver crisis which began around 970 has received much attention, it is often forgotten that it was only the last of several periodic crises which affected the flow of silver from the Islamic world to Russia and the Baltic. An examination of the dirham hoards from Russia and the Baltic, hoards which were deposited between c. 800 and c. 1015, reveals that already in the ninth century the flow of dirhams into Russia and the Baltic was disrupted by two such crises. In other words, the flow of silver from the Islamic world into Russia and the Baltic could be highly

erratic and it experienced several basic changes during the two centuries or so of its existence. The flow of silver as well as the trade relationships upon which this flow was predicated were never stable for very long. Consequently, rather than generalizations about the import of dirhams, as a whole, or Rūs/Rus'-Islamic trade, as a whole, the major task of monetary historians is now to identify the ups and downs in the export of dirhams to the north and to explore the economic and political developments which created these fluctuations. It is an honor, in a work dedicated to one of the great scholars of Viking-age monetary history who has also been a good friend over the years, to begin this task by describing the two silver crises of the ninth century and examining in some detail the first major silver crisis, a crisis which affected Russia and the Baltic during the last quarter of the century.

The import of Islamic dirhams into Russia and the Baltic began around the year 800 and employed a route which ran from Iran and Iraq across the Caucasus into Khazaria (5). This was the situation at the start of Islamic commerce with Eastern Europe. The initial crisis in the flow of dirhams to Russia and the Baltic took place c. 820s-c. 840s when there was a very marked decline in the number of new Islamic dirhams reaching Eastern Europe. As I have attempted to demonstrate elsewhere, the sharp drop in the quantity

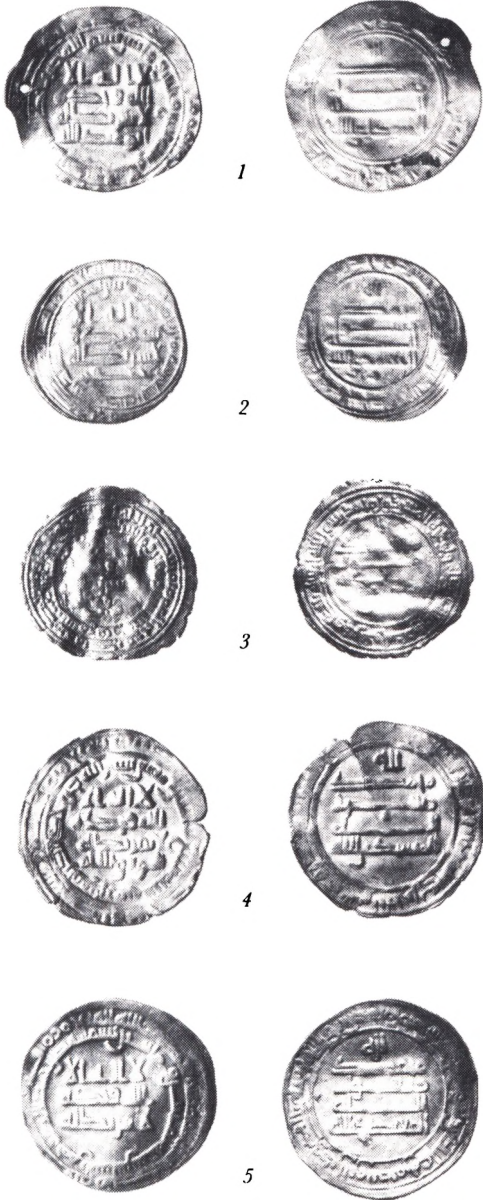


Fig. 1-5. 'Abbāsīd dirhams. Fig. 1. *Al-Mutawakkil, Madīnat al-Salām, 239 AH*. Fig. 2. *Al-Mu'tamid, Madīnat al-Salām, 258 A.H. (871/72)*. Fig. 3-4. *Al-Mu'tamid, Samarqand, 266 AH (879/80) and Armīnyah, 277 AH (890/91)*. Fig. 5. *Al-Mu'taḍid, Al-Shash, 280 AH (893/94)*. Royal Collection of Coins and Medals, National Museum, Copenhagen. Østrup catalogue no. 486, 484, 513b, 533, 545.

of new dirhams which appeared in Russia and the Baltic between c. 820s and c. 840s can be attributed to the precipitous fall off in the coinage of new dirhams by Islamic mints at this time (6). Few new dirhams reached Eastern Europe c. 820s-c. 840s because few new dirhams were struck within Islam at this time. However, this initial crisis in the flow of dirhams to Russia and the Baltic does not seem to have had any significant long-term effects. At most, it was a secondary factor in the shift of the major silver/trade route from the Caucasus to the Caspian Sea.

The first great silver crisis for Russia and the Baltic dates to c. 875-c. 900 and it resulted in fundamental changes in the flow of dirhams to Eastern Europe. To understand this first great silver crisis it is necessary to examine the dirham hoards deposited in Russia and the Baltic between 850 and 900. For convenience sake, the chronological composition of these hoards is depicted in a series of charts (7). Chart I shows the Russian and Baltic hoards deposited during the 850s. (Chart I). The largest component in every one of these hoards consists of dirhams struck in the first decade of the ninth century. These hoards also tend to have large components from before 800 and from the 810s. There are relatively few coins from the 820s, 830s, and 840s. In short, due to the initial and lesser silver crisis of c. 820s-c. 840s, Russian and Baltic dirham hoards of the 850s had very few new coins. These hoards were overwhelmingly composed of dirhams struck over three decades or more earlier.

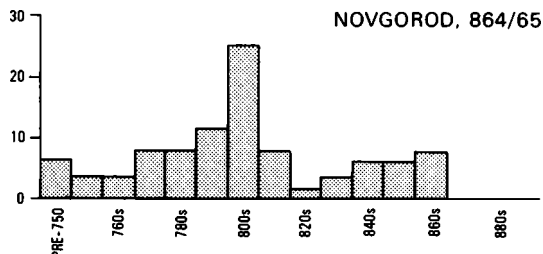
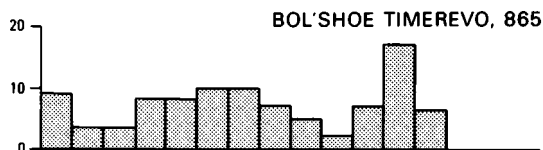
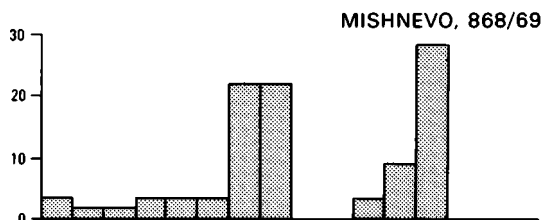
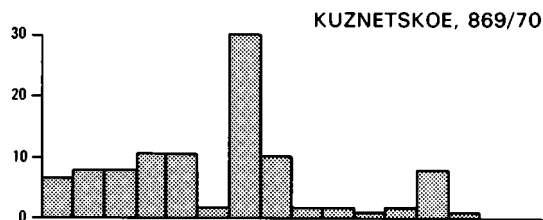
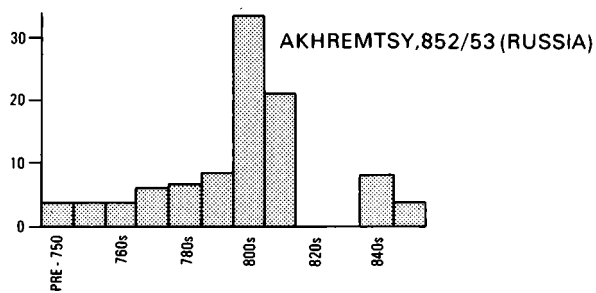
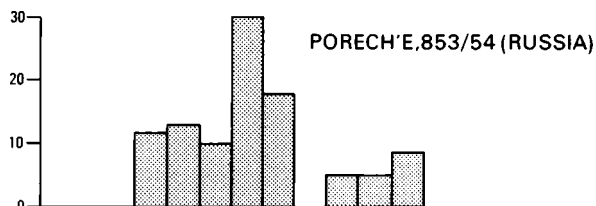
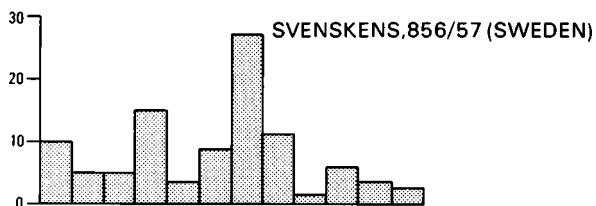
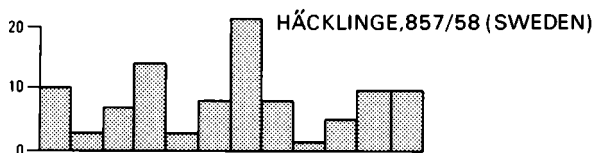
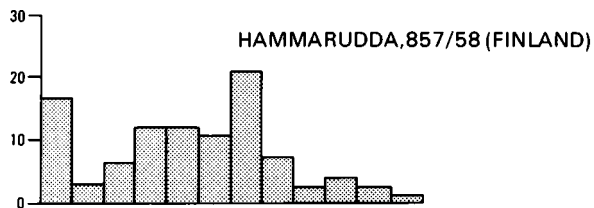


Chart II. The Chronological Composition of Russian Dirham Hoards of the 860s (in percentages). *Comgo universiteta*, Tom I, Vypusk 3, 1923, p. 13; V.L. Iarin, *Denezhno-vesovye sistemy russkogo srednevekov'ia: Domongol'skii period* (Moscow: 1956), pp. 129-130; P. H. Sawyer, *The Age of the Vimposition of Dirham Hoards of the 860 s from Poland and East Germany* (in percentages).

◀ Chart I. The Chronological Composition of Russian and Baltic Dirham Hoards of the 850s (in percentages).

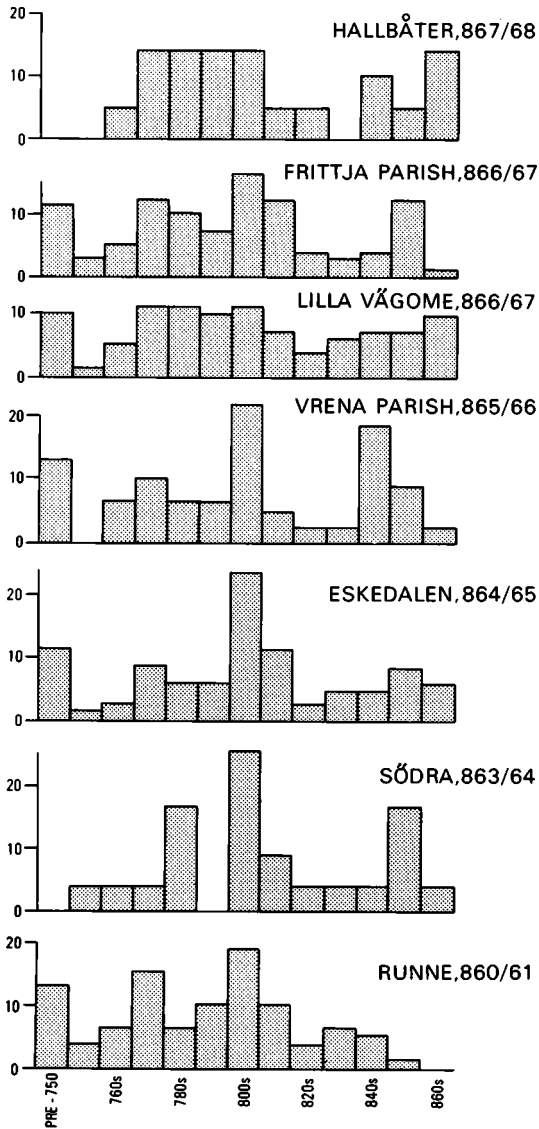


Chart III. The Chronological Composition of Swedish Dirham Hoards of the 860s (in percentages).

Charts II, III, and IV show the chronological composition of Russian and Baltic dirham hoards from the 860s (Charts II, III, and IV). Again, we note the large number of dirhams in these hoards which were struck before 820 and the relatively few coins in most hoards from the 820s, 830s, and 840s (8). At the same time, there are a number of hoards which contain significant components from the 850s and especially the 860s (Bol'shoe Timerevo, Mishnevo, Södra, Frittja Parish, and Hållbater). We can thus conclude

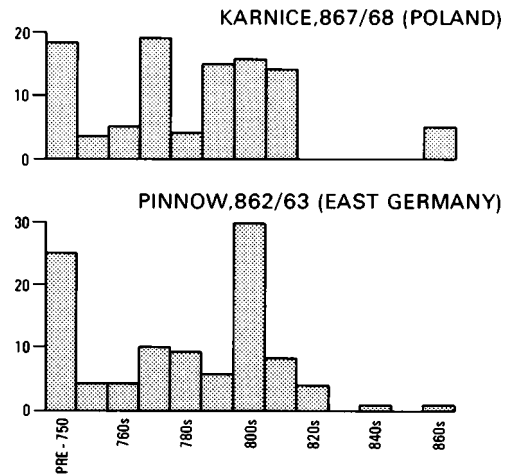


Chart IV. The Chronological Composition of Dirham Hoards of the 860s from Poland and East Germany (in percentages).

that the initial, lesser silver crisis of the ninth century came to an end in the 860s when new dirhams once again began to reach Russia and the Baltic in significant numbers.

The hoards from the 870s are shown in Charts V and VI. The three Russian hoards (Chart V) are fairly consistent: there are few dirhams from the 820s-840s, a growing number from the 850s, a peak in the 860s only exceeded by the 800s, and relatively few new dirhams struck in the 870s (Chart V).

The Swedish hoards from the 870s (Chart VI) are similar to those from Russia in their large components from the 850s and 860s and the comparatively few new coins from the 870s. (Chart VI). These Swedish hoards, however, differ from their Russian counterparts in having much larger components from the 830s and 840s. In any event, the Russian and Baltic hoards from the 870s reflect the influx of new dirhams struck in the 850s and 860s, a phenomenon which was first noted in the hoards of the 860s.

Turning to the hoards of the 880s (Charts V, VII, VIII), we see the first clear signs of the new silver crisis in Russia and the Baltic. The single hoard from Russia (Poltava, Chart V) has a peak in the 860s and then a sharp decline in the 870s and 880s. The pattern in the Swedish hoards (Chart VII) is comparable (Chart VII). Two of the three hoards (Dals and Kinner) have their greatest peak in the 860s and then decline in the 870s and 880s although the decline is not as precipitous as in the Russian hoards. The Sojvide hoard peaks in the 850s, declines in the 870s, and then returns to the levels of the 860s during the 880s. The sole Polish hoard (Czechow, Chart VIII) is very similar to the Russian hoard (Chart VIII). There is a peak in the 860s only exceeded by that of the 800s and then a severe decline in the 870s and

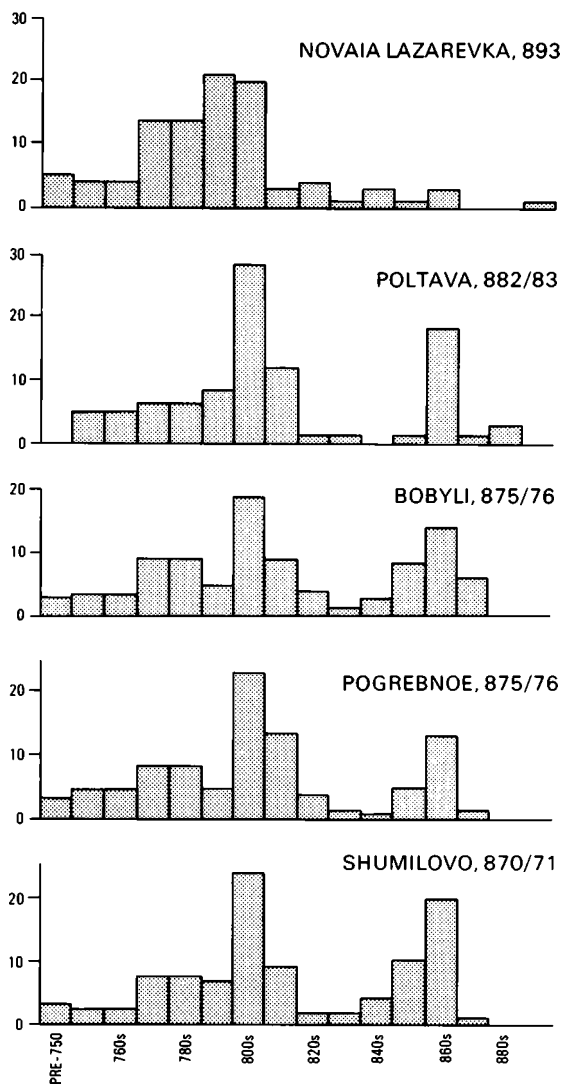


Chart V. The Chronological Composition of Russian Dirham Hoards from ca. 870-ca. 900 (in percentages).

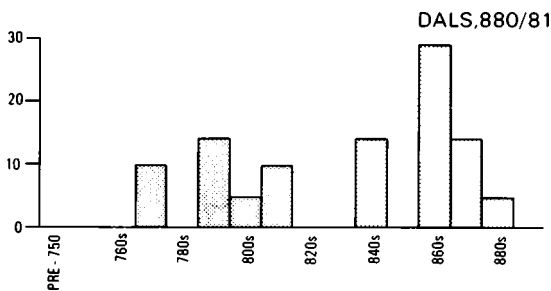
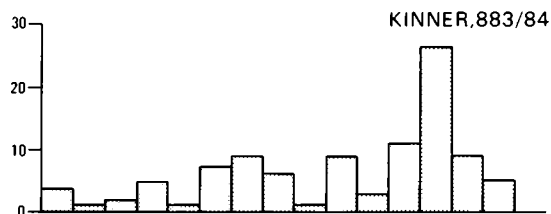
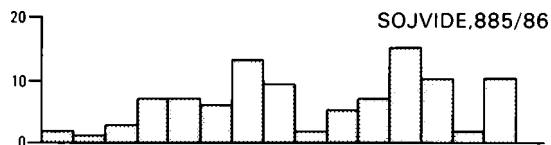
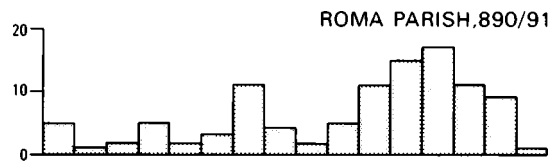
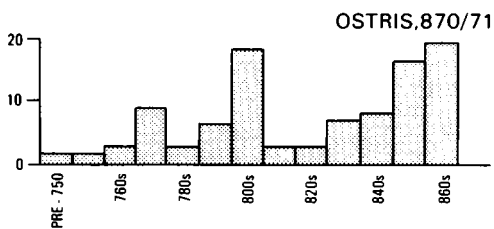
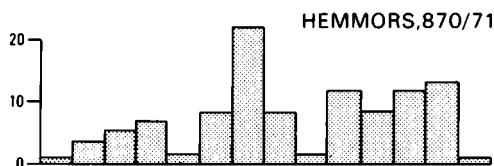
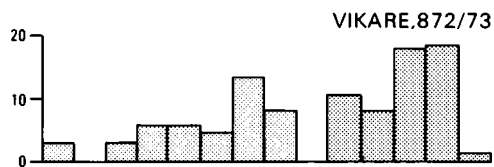
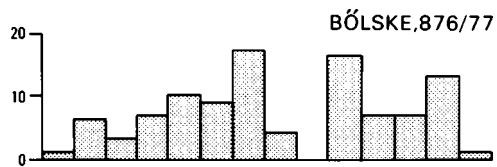


Chart VI. The Chronological Composition of Swedish Dirham Hoards of the 870s (in percentages).

Chart VII. The Chronological Composition of Swedish Dirham Hoards of the 880 and 890s (in percentages).

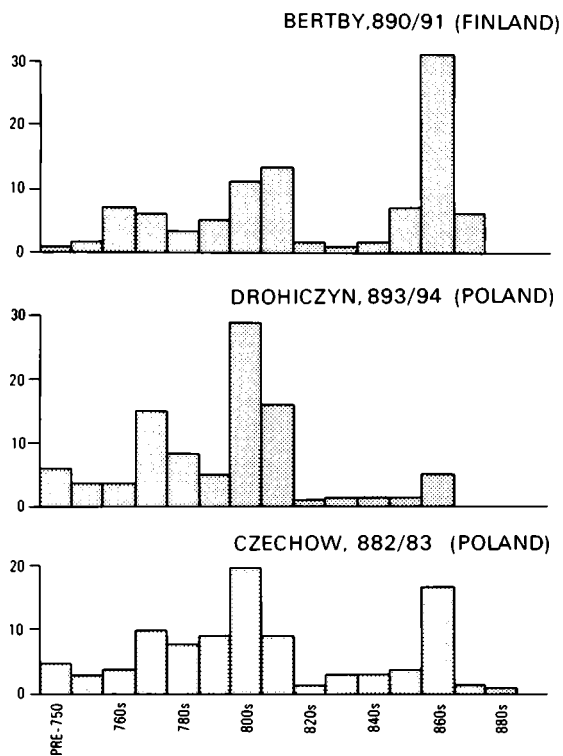


Chart VIII. The Chronological Composition of Polish and Finnish Dirham Hoards of the 880s and 890s (in percentages).

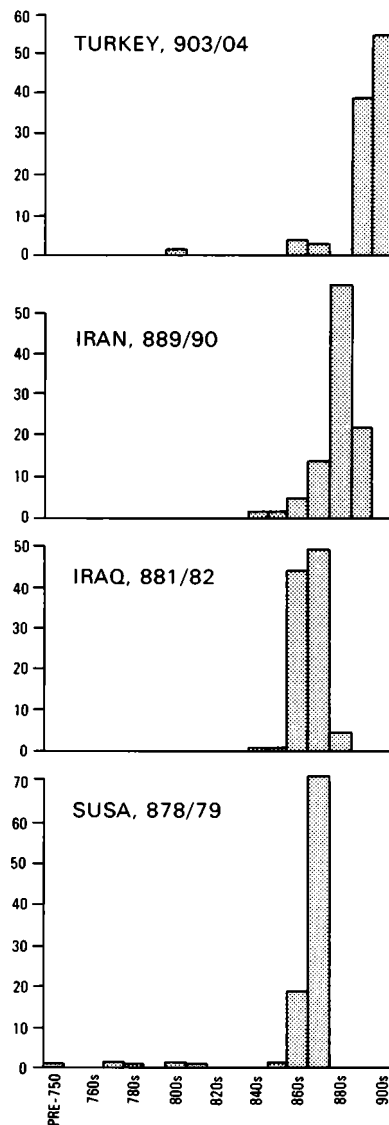


Chart IX. The Chronological Composition of Near Eastern Dirham Hoards from the Second Half of the Ninth Century (in percentages).

880s. In general, it appears that relatively few dirhams struck in the Islamic world after the 860s reached Russia and the Baltic by the 880s. After the renewal of exports of new dirhams in the 860s, the 870s and especially the 880s witnessed the emergence of a new silver crisis. Very few new dirhams were imported into Russia and the Baltic during the 870s and 880s.

The new silver crisis continued in the 890s. The sole Russian hoard of this decade (Novaia Lazarevka, Chart V) contains almost no dirhams of the 870s-890s. The Finnish hoard (Bertby, Chart VIII) has its greatest peak in the 860s followed by a sharp decline in the 870s. It has almost no coins from the 880s-890s. The Polish hoard (Drohiczyn, Chart VIII) has a small peak in the 860s and almost no dirhams from the 870s-890s. The single Swedish hoard of the 890s (Roma Parish, Chart VII) follows a comparable but less pronounced pattern. It has a peak in the 860s and then a clear but gentle decline in the 870s and 880s. It has almost no new dirhams from the 890s. Thus, all the hoards from the 890s reflect the same overall phenomenon: there was a distinct fall off in the number of dirhams struck after the 860s which reached Russia and the Baltic. In short, the evidence of the Russian and Baltic dirham hoards clearly shows a sharp drop in the quantity of dirhams issued between c. 875 and c. 900. This marked fall off in the number of new dirhams constitutes the essence of the first serious silver crisis in Russia and the Baltic.

Earlier, in discussing the initial silver crisis of the 820s-840s, it was argued that the sharp decline in the number of new dirhams was due to the severe fall off in dirham coinage within the Islamic world. Can we also explain the silver crisis of c. 875-c. 900 by a sharp decline in dirham production at this time? Fortu-

nately, as Chart IX shows, we have the evidence from several hoards of this period found in different parts of the Near East (9). (Chart IX). Chart IX demonstrates very clearly that these hoards are overwhelmingly composed of brand new Islamic dirhams. These four hoards contain very few coins more than twenty years old. In other words, the Near Eastern hoards deposited between 875 and the early tenth century prove that new dirhams were being struck in this part of the Islamic world between c. 875 and c. 900. The first major silver crisis in Russia and the Baltic arose because these new dirhams struck in Near Eastern mints were no longer reaching Eastern Europe. Some development or combination of developments took place in the last quarter of the ninth century to interrupt the flow of dirhams from the Near East into Russia and the Baltic.

Space limitations prevent us from examining the causes of the first major silver crisis in this study. Suffice it to say, at this point, that the crisis was solved in the early tenth century by a dramatic change in the trading patterns between Islam and Eastern Europe. During the ninth century, as we have seen, the Islamic trade with Eastern Europe ran from the Near East to Khazaria via the Caucasus and the Caspian. Now, in the early tenth century, the old trade with the Near East was replaced by a much more active trade with the Sāmānid lands of Central Asia. This new pattern is reflected in Chart X which shows a Polish hoard of the early tenth century. The Klukowicz hoard consists overwhelmingly of very new Sāmānid dirhams struck in the mints of Transoxiana. It contains very few older Abbāsīd coins, coins which were characteristic of the dirhams hoards of the second-half of the ninth century from Russia and the Baltic. While these older Abbāsīd dirhams continued to be found in many northern

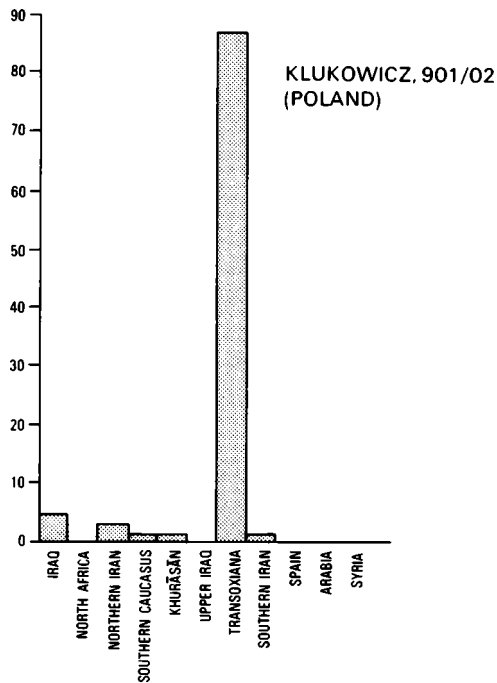
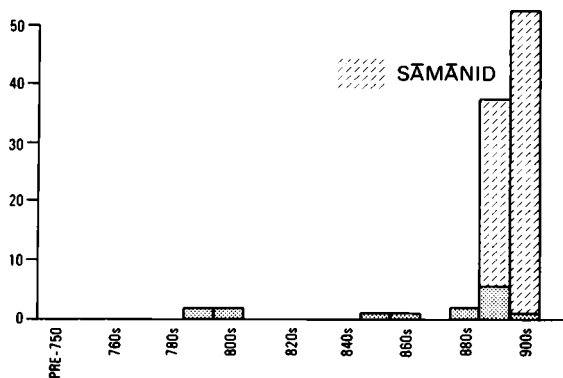


Chart X. The Profile of an Eastern European Hoard Deposited in the Early Tenth century (in percentages).

dirham hoards of the early tenth century, they rapidly disappeared from circulation in the north and were replaced by the new Sāmānid coins. In sum, the first major silver crisis in Russia and the Baltic came to an end c. 900 when a new relationship was formed between the merchants of Central Asia and Eastern Europe. It was this new relationship which opened the door to the import of hundreds of thousands of new Sāmānid dirhams into Russia and the Baltic and which put an end to the first major silver famine which began in these areas c. 875.

Notes

1. P. G. Liubomirov, "Torgovye sviazi Drevnei Rusi s Vostokom v VIII-IX vv.," *Uchenye zapiski gosudarstvennogo Saratovskogo universiteta*, Tom I, Vypusk 3, 1923, p. 13; V.L. Ianin, *Denezhno-vesovye sistemy russkogo srednevekov'ia: Domongol'skii period* (Moscow: 1956), pp. 129-130; P. H. Sawyer, *The Age of the Vikings* (London: 1962), pp. 112-114; P. H. Sawyer, *Kings and Vikings* (London-New York: 1982), pp. 125-126.
2. Ianin, *Denezhno-vesovye sistemy*, p. 129, n. 2.
3. See, for example, Robert P. Blake, "The Circulation of Silver in the Moslem East down to the Mongol Epoch," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 2(1937), pp. 291-328; Andrew M. Watson, "Back to Gold – and Silver," *Economic History Review*, 20(1967), pp. 1-34; E. A. Davidovich, "Iz oblasti denezhnogo obrashcheniia v Srednei Azii XI-XII vv.," *Numizmatika i epigrafika*, 2(1960), pp. 92-117; B. S. Saipanov, "Problema 'serebriannogo krizisa' denezhnogo obrashcheniia na Vostoke v numizmaticheskoi literature," *Vestnik Moskovskogo Universiteta: Istoriia*, 1976, No. 1, pp. 53-65.
4. Alfred E. Lieber, "International trade and coinage in the Northern Lands during the early Middle Ages: An introduction," in M.A.S. Blackburn and D.M. Metcalf, eds., *Viking-Age Coinage in the Northern Lands: The Sixth Oxford Symposium on Coinage and Monetary History* [British Archaeological Reports International Series 122] (Oxford: 1981), pp. 24-26.

5. See Thomas S. Noonan, "When and How Dirhams First Reached Russia: A Numismatic Critique of the Pirenne Theory," *Cahiers du Monde Russe et Soviétique*, 21(1980), pp. 401-469; Thomas S. Noonan, "Why Dirhams First Reached Russia: The Role of Arab-Khazar Relations in the Development of the Earliest Islamic Trade with Eastern Europe," forthcoming in *Archivum Eurasiae Medii Aevi*, 4(1984).
6. This point is discussed in my paper on "Early 'Abbāsīd Mint Output" presented at the British Museum and Royal Numismatic Society Symposium on the Use of Scientific Techniques for Studying the Coinage of Europe and the Mediterranean World A.D. 500-1500, London, 1984.
7. The data on the Russian and Baltic dirham hoards displayed in these charts is drawn from the following sources: Thomas S. Noonan, "Ninth-century dirham hoards from European Russia: A preliminary analysis," in Blackburn and Metcalf, eds., *Viking-Age Coinage in the Northern Lands*, pp. 47-117; Bengt E. Hovén, "Ninth-Century Dirham Hoards from Sweden," *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 13(1982), pp. 202-219; Thomas S. Noonan, "Ninth-Century Dirham Hoards from Northwestern Russia and the South-eastern Baltic," *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 13(1982), pp. 220-244; Andrzej Czapkiewicz et al., *Skarb dirhemów arabskich z Czechowa* (Warsaw-Wrocław: 1957); Maria Czapkiewicz, »Dalsza część skarbu dirhemów arabskich z Lublina-Czechowa,« *Wiadomości Numizmatyczne*, 14(1970), pp. 213-224; E. Soczewiński, »Kilka nieopublikowanych dirhemów ze skarbu Czechowskiego,« *Wiadomości Numizmatyczne*, 4(1960), pp. 69-72; Maria Czapkiewicz et al., *Skarb monet arabskich z Klukowicz powiat Siemiatycze* (Wrocław-Warsaw-Cracow: 1964); Maria Czapkiewicz, Franciszek Kmietowicz, *Skarb monet arabskich z okolic Drohiczyzna nad Bugiem* (Cracow: 1960); Beatrice Granberg, *Förteckning över Kufiska Myntfynd i Finland* [Studia Orientalia Edidit Societas Orientalis Fennica, XXXIV] (Helsinki: 1966). I should also like to thank Mr. Bengt E. Hovén for allowing me to utilize his unpublished data on ninth century Swedish dirham hoards. I should like to express my sincere thanks to the Graduate School of the University of Minnesota for the research grants which made these charts possible and to the Cartography lab of the University of Minnesota Department of Geography for composing these charts.
8. The exceptions are the hoards from Vrena Parish and Hållbater with their large component of dirhams from the 840s.
9. The data on the Near Eastern dirham hoards displayed in this chart comes from the following sources: G. C. Miles, "A Ninth Century Hoard of Dirhems Found at Susa," *Mémoires de la Mission archéologique en Iran*, 37(1960), pp. 67-145; *Coin Hoards*, 4(1978), pp. 68-69, No. 217; *Coin Hoards*, 6(1981), pp. 75-76, No. 272; Lutz Ilisch, »Ein Dirhamfund des frühen 10. Jahrhunderts aus der Gegend von Diyarbakir,« *Münstersche Numismatische Zeitung*, (1979), No. 1 (83), pp. vii-xiv. I should like to thank Mr. Nicholas Lowick for allowing me to utilize the detailed manuscript accounts of two of these hoards.