



Susanna Harris & Martin Goldberg

# Unwrapping the Galloway Hoard

*Unwrapping the Galloway Hoard* is a three-year UK Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC) project (2021-2024) which aims to challenge current understanding of the process of hoarding through an interdisciplinary study of one of the best-preserved hoards found in Britain to date.

Hoarding – the deliberate collection and burial of objects often made from precious metal – is a well-known phenomenon, primarily studied as buried wealth and popularly conceived as treasure. Associated with periods of social unease, such as the end of the Roman empire and the Viking raids of Early Medieval Britain and Ireland, hoards are often understood as valuable resources buried for security, although this position has been challenged recently (Bland 2015). Usually only inorganic artefacts survive. Buried around AD 900, and discovered in 2014 near Kirkcudbright, Dumfries and Galloway in Scotland, the Galloway hoard is the richest, most varied, and well-preserved collection of precious and exotic objects hoarded together in Viking-age Britain and Ireland (Goldberg and Davis 2021). Unusually, the Galloway hoard contains both organic and inorganic artefacts, and evidence of accumulation with separate bundles and caches. In addition to containing silver and gold, the Galloway hoard is unique in Britain due to the preservation of textiles and leather that wrap the objects, creating multiple caches and bundles within the hoard. The textiles include wool, linen, silk, braids, and embroidery. The technical mastery of the silk items matches the splendour of the other striking objects in the hoard.

The durability of metal objects in hoards as treasure, scrap, bullion, or currency is largely dictated by taphonomy (the effects of burial through both human and natural actions). These processes of decay and

differential preservation play a crucial role in hoard interpretation because perishable material rarely survives. Hoarding has the potential to reveal much about the process of collecting and assembling objects, but even well-considered hoards, such as the Staffordshire Anglo-Saxon hoard (seventh century CE), are limited by the survival only of metal and other non-perishable materials (Fern et al. 2019). Intricate wrappings of textiles, leather and braids, and the remains of a wooden box are objects in the Galloway hoard that do not normally survive.



Fig 1: Lid of textile-wrapped silver-gilt vessel from the Galloway hoard (© National Museums Scotland)



Fig 2: Silver bullion of the Galloway hoard (© National Museums Scotland)

The Galloway hoard was buried in four distinct caches: a textile-wrapped lidded vessel (fig. 1) containing multiple textile-wrapped objects; silver bullion within a leather wrapping; three gold objects in a small wooden box tucked in a cluster of silver arm-rings; and a stratigraphically separate, upper cache of silver arm-rings and ingots accompanied by a Christian pectoral cross (fig. 2). This accumulation of artefacts is rare evidence for objects being placed in multiple distinct bundles and caches before they were assembled into the hoard deposit. This remarkable

preservation provides a wealth of information about internal structure and accumulation. The containers and wrappings create distinct bundles whereby objects are placed in marked relationships to one another. By connecting certain objects and separating others, bundles have an integrity which establishes relationships within and between object groups in this hoard that would otherwise be lost through taphonomic processes. The parcels, bundles and perishable materials in this hoard allow us to explore much more than the final deposit and to look in detail



at the biography and accumulation of this assemblage (Joy 2016; Zedeño 2008).

The composition and cumulative potency of bringing the Galloway hoard together provides an exciting opportunity to re-examine why, and how, people amassed, curated, and buried objects. Accumulated over many years, with objects originating from near and far, connecting Europe and Asia, and exceptionally preserved with its original textile and leather wrappings, the Galloway hoard provides a unique source of evidence to ask: How, and why, did people assemble and collect objects before burying them, and how does the Galloway hoard, with its unique combination of organic and inorganic materials, change our understanding of hoarding during the Viking Age? By focusing on the process of assembling and collecting this *Unwrapping the Galloway Hoard* project will provide numerous gateways into the wider Viking Age world.

The project is hosted by National Museums Scotland in collaboration with the University of Glasgow and scientific investigators. It builds on the foundation work of conservation and recording already carried out by the National Museum of Scotland and many individuals and organisations involved in securing the find for the nation through the Treasure Trove legislative process.

The AHRC project is led by principal investigator, Martin Goldberg, Principal Curator of Medieval Archaeology and History at National Museums Scotland. The textile and leather research is led by co-investigator, Susanna Harris, Lecturer in Archaeology, with Postdoctoral Researcher Alexandra Makin, at the University of Glasgow. The scientific collaborators include: Caroline R. Cartwright, The British Museum, for the identification of wood and textile fibres using high-powered microscopy; Derek Hamilton, Scottish Universities Environmental

Research Centre (SUERC, Glasgow), for the radiocarbon dating programme and Bayesian analysis; Ina Vanden Berghe, Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage, Brussels (KIK-IRPA), for the analysis of textile dyes using high performance liquid chromatography (HPLC); University of Glasgow Polyomics for the identification of leather species using proteomics; and Alice Macente, x-ray computed tomography at the Universities of Strathclyde and Glasgow.

## Bibliography

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