



## The Polish discussion on medieval deposits of hack-silver

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The general similarity of the once-called “hoards” of silver items deposited mostly during the 10th and 11th centuries in Iceland, the British Isles, Scandinavia, Polabia, Poland and Baltic islands allows for an assumption that they testify to similarities in behaviour of people who lived in comparable historical – political and economic – circumstances. In a discussion on these finds which takes place in Poland there compete two contradictory interpretations.

Numismatists, who prefer the universalism of the economic rationalism, look mainly for simple practical explanations.<sup>1</sup> Thus, in their analyses of the distant past they apply a contemporary “European” system of values dominated by the “market” attitude towards life, where success is measured in gathered commodities. Such researchers of silver deposits openly make a rather surprising assumption that “[medieval] Scandinavians as well as Slavs, Finns and Balts had social norms that were not meaningfully different from those of their ancestors and descendants”.<sup>2</sup>

Such view removes the necessity of discussing the specificity of past societies. This cognitive naturalism leads researchers to “a self-realizing presupposition that [their] and ancient culture’s normative categories are identical, or more precisely: they were, they are (hence they will be) identical, so there is no real need for reconstructing past culture”.<sup>3</sup> This allows them to assume that our system of values may be directly transferred to any past

<sup>1</sup> Recently: Mateusz Bogucki, *Dlaczego we wczesnym średniowieczu powstawały skarby złomu srebrnego? Uwagi na marginesie prac Jacka Kowalewskiego i Przemysława Urbańczyka*. *Wiadomości Numizmatyczne* 48, 2004, 49–76; Stanisław Suchodolski, *Kultowa czy ekonomiczna geneza skarbów epoki wikingów?*. *Biuletyn Numizmatyczny* 3(331), 2003, 185–196; Stanisław Suchodolski, *Zamknięcie dyskusji*. *Wiadomości Numizmatyczne* 49/2, 2005, 219–221.

<sup>2</sup> Bogucki, *Dlaczego* (footnote 1).

<sup>3</sup> Marian Kwapiński, *O aksjomatach naoczności archeologicznej*. In: *Czarownice. Feneralia lednickie 2*, ed. Jacek Wrzesiński (Wrocław 2000) 37–50, here 48.





reality and that our contemporary rationalism and the tendency to economize have always been an established norm.

This still dominant “common sense approach” allows for avoiding the trouble of theoretical discussion. Its adherents do not see a reason to support their hypotheses by any analysis of the limits resulting from the given historical context. There is also a tendency to separate the spheres of economic and “magical” practices or even to contrast the two. Whereas in pre-modern cultures there were no such rationalistic division between practical and symbolic spheres and they were characterized by a syncretic magico-mythical perception of the world.<sup>4</sup> If today para-magical practices are still more or less accepted elements of many people’s lives, it should be obvious that in the Early Middle Ages economic and symbolic spheres must have been closely (and inseparably) connected with each other so that almost every action had its ritual/symbolic context.

Every transaction and every item which changed its owner had certain symbolic values besides their economic functions. Supremacy of one aspect over the other depended on a given social context defined by the interaction of the participants of a particular event. Neither items nor transactions themselves did have any immanent function or value objectivised in their shape, weight or material but social practices that gave them various economic and symbolic meanings and functions. The same piece of jewellery had, obviously, a different function when ostentatiously worn in public by a leader than when it was officially confined to a person of the same social status during a ceremonial exchange of gifts, or when it was simply given to somebody of inferior rank in an act of demonstrative generosity. Still different were the item’s functions when it was ceremonially buried with its owner, when stolen by a grave robber, and different when it was subsequently sold to a foreign merchant who took it “abroad”, where again it could have been acquired by a local leader to wear it during official meetings, etc. Therefore, there is not much sense in generalizations made regardless the situational contexts as an item has no inherent function of its own – neither symbolic nor economic.

Archaeologists who tend to accept a substantial role of “irrational” behaviour and importance of cultural symbolism in the Early Medieval societies stress the necessity to include in the studies also various aspects of magical thinking.<sup>5</sup> They perceive the tendency to look everywhere for prag-

<sup>4</sup> E. g. Michał Buchowski, *Magia i rytuał* (Warszawa 1993).

<sup>5</sup> Władysław Duczko, *Test or magic? Pecks on the Viking-Age silver*. In: *Moneta mediaevalis*, ed. Borys Paszkiewicz (Warszawa 2002) 193–208; id., *Zebrać, zdeprecjonować, schować i zapomnieć. O skarbach srebrnych Skandynawii okresu wikingów*. *Wiado-*





matic logic as trivialisation of the richness of the early medieval reality which cannot be reduced to only one sphere, e.g. economy. Such a reductionism, despite making analyses easier, makes it difficult to understand the socio-cultural complexity of the studied reality. And, “it is important to understand that the peoples and cultures denoted by ‘the Viking Age’ are *other*, radically different from any present or future cultural contexts trying to understand them”.<sup>6</sup> We have to accept the fact that we know little about the past and avoid easy generalizations suggested by the contemporary mentality. I do not claim that it is possible to completely free oneself from one’s own cultural baggage, because the “mutual interdependence of our cognition, understanding and interpretation of the past events [...] and our culturally determined categories of thinking” is quite obvious.<sup>7</sup> However, we have to be aware of the consequences of this interdependence.

Both chronology and geography of the analyzed phenomenon of hiding hack-silver deposits<sup>8</sup> suggest that their interpretation should refer to the period of transition from the pre-state organizations to the early territorial states. These deposits concentrate in the areas of the direct activity of the Scandinavians or at least where some Scandinavian influence was present. This allows us to make use of the rich Scandinavian written sources, which may help to understand the mechanisms behind collecting and depositing silver items. Knowledge of the historical reality recorded mainly in the sagas, and interpreted with the help of historical anthropology, makes it possible to describe the socio-economic context of hack-silver hiding.

After publications of Karl Polanyi no simplified *models of the political economy* of the pre-state organizations can be satisfactory any more. Anthropologists stress problems involved in making clear-cut distinctions between the compulsory and voluntary cooperation, gifts and taxes, production and

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mości Numizmatyczne 49/2, 2005, 205–218; Jacek Kowalewski, Okoliczności deponowania wczesnośredniowiecznych skarbów srebrnych na obszarze Słowiańszczyzny Zachodniej. Próba reinterpretacji znaczenia. *Acta Universitatis Nicolai Copernici. Archeologia* 28, 2001, 59–97; id., Dlaczego, czy jak deponowano skarby we wczesnym średniowieczu? *Wiadomości Numizmatyczne* 48/2, 2004, 181–191; Przemysław Urbańczyk, Wczesnośredniowieczne skarby złomu srebrnego. In: *Moneta mediaevalis*, ed. Borys Paszkiewicz (Warszawa 2002) 209–224; id., Kto deponował skarby zdeprecjonowanego srebra i dlaczego? (polemika z krytyką Mateusza Boguckiego i Stanisława Suchodolskiego). *Wiadomości Numizmatyczne* 48/2, 2004, 167–180.

<sup>6</sup> Fredrik Svanberg, *Decolonizing the Viking Age 1* (Stockholm 2003) 106.

<sup>7</sup> Stanisław Tabaczyński, The relationship between history and archaeology. Elements of the present debate. *Medieval Archaeology* 37, 1993, 1–14, here 11.

<sup>8</sup> In Poland there still prevails the term “treasure” (*skarby*) which automatically turns our attention towards economy.





consumption, or between robbery and trade.<sup>9</sup> An earlier concentration on the economic sphere gave way to paying more attention to the key role of the political control over crucial – material, human and symbolic – resources. Historical anthropology calls pre-state societies “chiefdoms” pointing to the political aspects of their economy which was dominated by mechanisms of redistribution of the resources controlled by the power centre.

Chiefdom in the regions with no attractive natural resources, where land cultivation does not provide politically significant production surplus, results in a development of a characteristic situation. Processes of the hierarchization of social structure and emergence of local power centres typical of the Early Middle Ages led to the formation of a network of numerous small organisations gathered around rival leaders. Their economic position was often a result of their control over the best lands. Their political power was based on a consent of followers who acknowledged their leadership. A geopolitical competition among leaders was resolved equally well by arms or building alliances as well as by means of silver or arguments appealing to the symbolic sphere.

It was a system of political economy based not on market mechanisms but on a redistribution of goods and privileges which remained in the hands of the power centre. The circulation of luxury commodities played the strategic role in the maintenance of the hierarchical social structure. Possession of commodities and their distribution constituted an important element of maintaining one's social status. The result of the significance traditionally ascribed to noble metals was that the circulation of valuable metals (and items made of them) – exchanged in commercial or ceremonial transactions or simply given away – played a crucial role in establishing power relations.

The leader's capability of fulfilling his people's need for well-being and sense of security depended on his charisma, courage and military success. The one deserted by good fortune (confirmed by successes in the battlefield, trading and political competition) was abandoned by recent followers who could either choose other candidate for leadership from among themselves or offer their support to some neighbour rival. It resulted in a constant political instability with local leaders permanently balancing on the borderline of the two possibilities – winning or disappearing. What is more, military resolutions were a short-sighted alternative as it was not an extermination of opponents that strengthen the “geopolitical” status of a leader but an increase in number of his subordinates. People, and not the range of

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. *Specialization, Exchange and Complex Societies*, ed. Elizabeth M. Brumfield/Timothy K. Earle (Cambridge 1987).





the controlled territory, determined the amount of production surpluses delivered to the power centre as well as the strength of military support for the leader.

In case of the scarcity of the natural environment's resources which did not provide any considerable surplus, none of the neighbouring rivals for superior power could gain the upper hand and permanently annex, or at least make politically dependent, the neighbouring societies which acknowledged the authority of other leaders. There was a possibility of one leader gaining a temporary superiority over the others but none of them could gather "capital" (such as luxury goods, significant food supplies surplus, control over agriculturally attractive lands, respect based on numerous military triumphs etc.) that would allow him to finally tip the balance in his favour by financing a large-scale military support and/or permanently bring over to his side a decisive number of followers ready to jointly support his political status. Such "capital" was not supposed to increase the leader's wealth, nor to raise the level of his consumption, but to win him a higher number of loyal followers.

The leader's generosity was a crucial element of his struggle for the maintenance of a dominant social position as this did not depend on the amount of gathered wealth but on the ability to "invest" it in his followers whom he had to provide with material support and/or military protection. Thus, he had to have all the time at his disposal attractive commodities which could serve as gifts as well as food resources sufficient to organise sumptuous feasts. Sons of Hoskuld described in *Laxdæla saga* (chapter 27) followed those rules as after their father's death they threw a funeral feast for 1080 people all of whom were given a present. From the two it was Olaf, whose financial contribution to this event was the highest, who inherited the father's position of a leader. He could have been as well a bankrupt at the moment, but he had restored social order by sustaining political loyalty of the family's clients and giving a clear signal to the potential rivals for leadership.

There was a possibility to form short-term alliances strengthened by opportunistic marriages and to win a temporary military victory, however, the only long-term strategy was to find a source of "capital" which could be converted into political profits. "The increasingly violent competition among the ever fewer and more powerful big-men led to fighting with silver as well as fighting with weapons".<sup>10</sup> In the period discussed it was necessary

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<sup>10</sup> Ross Samson, Fighting with silver. Rethinking trading, raiding and hoarding. In: Social approaches to Viking studies, ed. Ross Samson (Glasgow 1991) 123–136, here 133.





to look for the capital “abroad”. Thus, it was the political and economic pressure that was the driving force behind the Scandinavians’ immense outward activity in the Viking Age. In fact an attack on Lindisfarne monastery in 792 – the first manifestation of this expansion to be mentioned in the sources – was chosen as the symbolic beginning of the Viking Age.

Those who took part in the expeditions were determined to succeed, because “fruitless expeditions are everywhere in the sagas, sources of humiliation”<sup>11</sup> proving a low value of the unlucky ones. The main goal of their combined trading/plundering overseas expeditions was to gain a proper reputation and enhance their position in social structures of power. Collecting commodities which could be later redistributed facilitated the achievement of this goal. It was about “luxury items, and particularly silver, to win friends, influence the powerful, and purchase allies”.<sup>12</sup> The main aim of those expeditions was not to make a direct economic profit but to acquire attractive items and thus to prove one’s leadership abilities and good fortune which were indispensable in all spheres of the leader’s activity – in the battlefield, trade, agriculture and in social relations.

As a result of this mechanism of social pressure (well visible in sagas) to Scandinavia and territories whose inhabitants took part in Viking expeditions there began to flow large amounts of “imported” commodities. Among those were also the always very attractive and sought-after precious metal items which are our focus here. Such acquisitions temporarily improved the political position of their owner giving him a “capital” advantage over his rivals. However, if opponents who had also taken the risk of an overseas expedition also succeeded, the spiral of competition reached only a higher level of intensity which demanded even greater effort on the part of all involved. The “patronage generosity” practiced by leaders in permanent need for the political and military support was an indispensable element of the redistributive economy. However, the result of such practices was that the constant increase in the amount of commodities in circulation did not ease conditions of the competition. A success of a particular leader did not depend on some “absolute” value of his political “capital” but on its significance in relation to “capitals” gathered by his rivals. There was no objective measure of wealth as the leaders’ aim was not its accumulation but, rather, gaining an immediate (even if temporary) superiority in generosity, fame and status. It was a never-ending spiral of competition which added an incredible dynamism to the geopolitical situation of the time.

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<sup>11</sup> William I. Miller, Gift, sale, payment, raid: case studies in the negotiation and classification of Exchange in medieval Iceland. *Speculum* 61, 1986, 18–50, here 29.

<sup>12</sup> Samson, Fighting with silver (footnote 10) 132.







Such a view upon the political and economic as well as psychological conditionings of the Viking period allows for questioning the validity of a still predominant conviction of a mainly market *function of precious metal items* (including coins) in the pre-state societies.<sup>13</sup> A system of a highly politicized economy cannot be analysed solely in the categories of market mechanisms as the economic rationality surely was not a prevailing characteristic of the pre-state, and hence “pre-market”, societies. “The mechanisms of economy at work in the Arab caliphates, Frankish kingdom or Ængles’ kingdoms could not function in the North where political organisations were still rudimentary, at the level that precluded the application of advanced instruments of the market policy”.<sup>14</sup>

The same applied to the circulation of precious metal items, the value of which depended not only on their weight and purity of the metal but also on the type of a product, quality of goldsmith’s work or even on its ascribed magical qualities depending on its former owner. Obviously, there were also purely commercial transactions made by merchants who took advantage of the differences in the exchange value of diverse commodities on different markets, or by goldsmiths processing the precious metals. However, those transactions were of no economic importance for society in general. Merchants and goldsmiths rendered services mainly to social elites, although they obviously bought also commodities of everyday use.<sup>15</sup> In fact, even in Western Europe with a better developed market economy “the use of coins was spreading, but only for expensive items or transactions; there must still have been bartering at local level, for food and other essentials”.<sup>16</sup>

For the political elites the large-scale trade was not a source of financial profits but rather of rare goods of ostentatious consumption which stressed their status.

These elites generated the demand for luxury products and controlled the circulation of precious metals which had a strategic significance. Items made of those metals, along with decorated weapons, were the main elements of the emphasizing of social position. They were used for establish-

<sup>13</sup> By the term “market” I understand a mass participation of members of particular community in an economy with systematized rules of exchange regulated by means of reference to an objective measure of some money (?).

<sup>14</sup> Duczko, Zebrać, zdeprecjonować (footnote 5) 207.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Ibrahim ibn Jakub’s account of prices of hens and wheat in Prague in 965; Relacja Ibrahima ibn Jakuba do krajów słowiańskich w przekazie al-Bekriego, ed. Tadeusz Kowalski. Monumenta Poloniae Historica s. n. 1 (Kraków et al. 1946) 49.

<sup>16</sup> John Schofield, Urban settlement 1. Western Europe. In: The Archaeology of Medieval Europe 1, ed. James Graham-Campbell/Magdalen Valor (Århus 2007) 111–129, here 127.





ing relations of power in ceremonial transactions, in which “it is the passage of time between gift and counter-gift that keeps the relations alive”.<sup>17</sup> Hence the circulation of silver has, above all, an elitist character as it concerned people who took an active part in political life of the particular community.

Thus, silver circulated mainly in a sphere of elitist consumption and exchange, which was regulated not by some “objective” market rules but by political mechanisms of establishing power relations. The majority of transactions aimed at creating new or sustaining old connections within social hierarchy. What mattered was mainly the symbolic, or even magical<sup>18</sup> value of a particular item as well as social status of persons exchanging gifts (rather than commodities). Silver did not serve as a usual means to buy meat or grain but, rather, to gain political loyalty, which was expressed in voluntary contribution in meat or grain. Silver was not given simply as a daily rate for warriors but as a reward for participation in a joint military campaign and in the hope to secure a military support for the next expedition. Silver was not used to pay compulsory rent but to express mutual respect depending on the person’s position in a social hierarchy.

The higher was the status of a person, the more frequently s/he had to participate in the ceremonial exchange of precious gifts<sup>19</sup> and the greater his/her generosity, often expressed by means of precious metal goods, had to be. The leader, although he ostentatiously manifested his status by making a display of the most luxurious items, did not accumulate but distributed the acquired “capital”. Maintenance of the status demanded material and non-material surplus reciprocation of the gifts received from those lower in a social hierarchy, as the relative value of the gift depended on the social position of the giver.<sup>20</sup> It has been beautifully depicted in *Gautreks saga* (chapter 6) which describes Ref who, beginning with a whetstone, was given by subsequent “kings” increasingly valuable gifts to finally become himself a jarl in Götaland.<sup>21</sup> In such a context, even a gift presented to gods can be perceived as obliging them to return the favour. This, in turn, is illustrated by a Norwegian runic stone’s inscription by somebody called Sakse who ex-

<sup>17</sup> Samson, Fighting with silver (footnote 10) 92.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Aron Gurevich, Wealth and gift-bestowed among the ancient Scandinavians. *Scandinavica. An international journal of Scandinavian studies* 7, 1968, 126–138.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. e. g. Matthias Hardt, Silbergeschirr als Gabe im Frühmittelalter, *Ethnographisch-Archäologische Zeitschrift* 37, 1997, 431–444.

<sup>20</sup> Aron Gurevich, Kategorie kultury średniowiecznej (Warszawa 1976) 227 f.

<sup>21</sup> *Gautreks saga*, In: *Fornaldarsögur Norurlanda* 4, ed. G. Jónsson (Reykjavik 1950) 1–50.







pressed his conviction that “in reward for building this bridge, the God will help my mother Turid’s soul”.<sup>22</sup>

Apart from such “vertical” exchange there were also “horizontal” transactions between people of similar position in social hierarchy. These were mainly to “ensure good relations and avoid dangerous frictions”.<sup>23</sup> “The precise composition, quality, and quantity of the gifts were crucial, not as objects in themselves, but in the information they communicated about the relationships, actual and potential”.<sup>24</sup> “Gift-giving is at the same time voluntary and a social must”.<sup>25</sup> In such a circulation products of precious metals were not converted into material commodities but into political influences, which were maintained by a discretionary redistribution of surpluses remaining at the power centre’s disposal. Permanent circulation of attractive goods was thus an important element of sustaining social order and maintaining mutual contacts.<sup>26</sup>

Meanwhile, there is still a nearly full consensus among numismatics that “precious metal flowed in mainly by means of trade and it was later used as money in an internal exchange”.<sup>27</sup> In this traditional view interpretation of the silver (fragmented or unfragmented) as the means of payment cannot be denied.<sup>28</sup> While, in my opinion, in studies on chiefdom systems of political economy – controlled not by the market mechanisms but by rules of sustaining the hierarchical social order – it is hard to justify the separation of the spheres of economic activity and symbolic/magical practices.

The function of coins – a special form of silver – need separate detailed discussion. For this discussion it is important that many coins circulated in their original form in areas around Baltic. It is rather puzzling considering a common practice of processing “foreign” forms of precious metals after the local fashion. Adding to this the two excerpts from ibn Fadlān and ibn Rosteh about Scandinavians accepting silver in the form of coins, there seems to be no “doubts about the economic significance of coins for Rus’

<sup>22</sup> Aslak Liestøl, *Innskripta på Eiksteinen*. Stavanger Museums Årbok 1972, 1973, 67–76.

<sup>23</sup> Åsa Dahlin Hauken, *Gift-exchange in Early Iron Age Norse society*. In: *Social approaches to Viking studies*, ed. Ross Samson (Glasgow 1991) 105–112, here 107.

<sup>24</sup> Ross Samson, *Economic anthropology and Vikings*, In: *Social Approaches to Viking Studies*, ed. Ross Samson (Glasgow 1991) 87–96, here 90.

<sup>25</sup> Elisabeth Vestergaard, *Gift-giving, hoarding, outdoings*. In: *Social approaches to Viking studies*, ed. Ross Samson (Glasgow 1991) 97–104, here 97.

<sup>26</sup> Gurevich, *Wealth* (footnote 18).

<sup>27</sup> Suchodolski, *Kultowa czy ekonomiczna geneza* (footnote 1) 186.

<sup>28</sup> Joern Staecker, *Brutal Vikings and gentle traders*. *Lund Archaeological Review* 43, 1997, 95.



people”.<sup>29</sup> However, I consider it a too hasty transfer of payment standards that functioned at the regulated Muslim markets to a completely different socioeconomic reality.

In a more detailed analysis it should be considered whether money in the form of coins was something completely different from its non-monetary forms – both those made of precious metals (ornaments and chopped silver) as well as others (various pre-monetary “currencies”, slaves, animals, agricultural products etc.).<sup>30</sup> Apart from an obvious convenience of using an easily convertible and standardised form of silver in coins, we can consider an additional magical function of those circular items covered with unintelligible signs which could not be deciphered by anybody in Central Europe (which diminished the guarantee function of the stamps). We should also take into account the consequences of considerable fluctuations in the inflow of Arabic coins.<sup>31</sup>

The practice of *hiding silver* is most often explained by reference to the economic sphere. In the extreme case it is believed that this phenomenon “suggests the existence of a large, in comparison with needs, supply of silver money”.<sup>32</sup> Depositing silver can be also considered as a means of gathering a proper dowry or a sum needed for a ransom, or as a method to avoid “taxation” by hiding a part of valuable resources. It could have also been a simple way of securing a sum needed for some important transaction, of gathering provisions for hard times or a means of fulfilling the very need of amassing a fortune. All of these are explanations convince with their simplicity of economic rationalism, however, they are not supported with an analysis of historical context.

The same is true for a suggestion that silver was hidden because “most of the peasant families had so much [silver] that they could bury it”<sup>33</sup> as a

<sup>29</sup> Bogucki, Dłaczego (footnote 1).

<sup>30</sup> Wojciech Dziędużycki, *Kruszce w systemach wartości i wymiany społeczeństwa Polski wczesnośredniowiecznej* (Poznań 1995) 97 f.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Sebastian Brather, *Frühmittelalterliche Dirham-Schatzfunde in Europa. Probleme ihrer wirtschaftsgeschichtlichen Interpretation aus archäologische Perspektive*. *Zeitschrift für Archäologie des Mittelalters* 23/24, 1997, 73–153.

<sup>32</sup> Jacek Adamczyk, *Płacidła w Europie Środkowej i Wschodniej w średniowieczu* (Warszawa 2004) 114.

<sup>33</sup> Heiko Steuer, *Gewichtsgeldwirtschaften im frühgeschichtlichen Europa. Feinwaagen und Gewichte als Quellen zur Währungsgeschichte*. In: *Untersuchungen zu Handel und Verkehr IV. Der Handel der Karolinger- und Wikingerzeit*, hrsg. Klaus Düwel/Herbert Jankuhn/Harald Siems/Dieter Timpe. *Abhandlungen der Akademie der Wissenschaften Göttingen, phil.-hist. Kl., 3. Folge* 156 (Göttingen 1987) 405–527, here 473.





considerable majority of their transactions concerned a simple exchange of goods of everyday use – exchange of low value and at a small scale. A “pot” could be easily exchanged for a “hen” without the necessity of using any monetary resources, which were completely redundant for majority of people. Everything could be exchanged (including the pleasantries, services and obligations) on condition that those transactions were “socially defined”.<sup>34</sup> An exchange value of particular commodities and services was established locally and on a short-term basis without the need to refer to any objective measure such as some “currency” (monetary or pre-monetary).

It is still a problematic question why so many deposits survived to our times. The fact that they were never recovered from the hiding place would probably have to be explained with the death or panic flight of all the owners of these precious deposits, which seems hardly probable in the light of a high number of such discoveries. Therefore, let us try to consider an alternative thesis: that those “hoards” were deposited without the intention of recovering them. Maybe the whole point was to “collect, depreciate, hide and forget” about this silver.<sup>35</sup> Such a view can be substantiated by reference to the mentioned above model of politicized economy in which silver, circulating in an elitist sphere where power relations were established, had a mainly symbolic, and not financial, value.

In such a system, if “hoarding becomes a goal in itself it is most disgraceful”<sup>36</sup> because it disrupt the process of sustaining social order, which makes such a practice socially reprehensible. Hence, e. g., keeping a hoard for oneself was perceived as shameful and it could bring misfortune to the wrongdoer. One who experienced such a fate was Erik the Red, the discoverer of Greenland, who painfully fell off his horse after hiding a “chest full of gold and silver”. He recognized the accident as a due punishment and immediately told his wife to dig out the hoard.<sup>37</sup>

Unfortunately, other written sources which mention the fact of hiding a hoard do not explain emotions and plans accompanying the action. Icelandic “Book of Settlement” says, e. g., that “Geirmund has hidden much of his money”,<sup>38</sup> Thord “buried much money”,<sup>39</sup> and Ketilbjorn “buried

<sup>34</sup> Vestergaard, Gift-giving (footnote 25) 98.

<sup>35</sup> Duczko, Zebrać, zdeprecjonować (footnote 5) 2005.

<sup>36</sup> Vestergaard, Gift giving (footnote 22) 102.

<sup>37</sup> *Eiríks saga*, In: The Vinland sagas, translated by Magnus Magnusson/Hermann Pálsson (London 1965) 73–105, here chapter 5.

<sup>38</sup> *Landnámabóka*. In: Íslendigabók. Landnámabók. Fyrri hluti, ed. Jakob Benediktsson (Reykjavik 1968) 115.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 371.





silver”.<sup>40</sup> Two excerpts about the digging out of such “hoards” concern either an accidental discovery of “silver buried in the ground”<sup>41</sup> or stealing of a hidden deposit by slaves,<sup>42</sup> i.e., people who did not know or did not observe rules of proper behaviour. *Svarfdæla saga* mentions an intentional deposition of hack-silver for clearly magical purposes. It contains a story about an Icelandic colonist who marked the boundaries of his property by going round the land and burying half mark of silver in three different places. This is the usual interpretation of “hoards” hidden at the property’s border.<sup>43</sup> These were not individual deposits but the collective ones as in Viking Age Scandinavian societies “power resided in the family (*ætt*) rather than in individuals”.<sup>44</sup> Magical functions are obviously ascribed also to non-returnable burial deposits.<sup>45</sup> The magical function of “hoards” is indirectly confirmed by Icelandic medieval legislation, which, after Christianisation, explicitly forbids burying of the precious metals.

The above examples suffice to show that studies on hoards of hack-silver cannot be limited to the, prevailing in Polish numismatic literature, strictly pragmatic and economic interpretations reducing the problem to logically interpretable manifestations of “supply”, “demand”, “material’s quality”, “production cycle” etc. When we analyse the circulation (and exclusion from it) of precious metal items we should take into account the significant role that ritual and magical practices played in traditional societies, as they were an imminent element of the practices of “taming” the surrounding world and increasing safety of contacts with the “others”. Arguments of proponents of the primacy of economic rationalism, who recognize a prevalence of a profit-seeking attitude in early medieval societies, trivialise the cultural richness of that world, the inseparable part of which constituted also practices untypical or even irrational from the perspective of the contemporary market economy’s principles.

Proponents of the traditional interpretation do take into consideration non-economic aspects of the problem, but they categorise them separately as “odd” finds. Precious metals deposits are divided into: (1) “Deposits of

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 385.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>43</sup> Jörn Staecker, Brutal Vikings and gentle traders. *Lund Archaeological Review* 43, 1997, 89–103, here 97.

<sup>44</sup> Liv H. Domasnes, Women, kinship, and the basis of power in the Norwegian Viking Age. In: *Social approaches to Viking studies*, ed. Ross Samson (Glasgow 1991) 69–74, here 69.

<sup>45</sup> Stanisław Suchodolski, Skarb monet i ozdób z X wieku oraz inne monety znalezione na Cmentarzysku w Niemczy. *Wiadomości Numizmatyczne* 28/1–2, 1984, 92–105.





the economic type”, where silver “was above all a means of payment or an accumulation of value”, (2) “Deposits of jewellery only”, which are “an accumulation of riches” and contain items symbolizing “power and wealth”, (3) “deposits of the cult type”, buried in places where their recovery was impossible.<sup>46</sup>

The proposed division of deposits into “economic”, “prestige” and “cult” types in an obvious way determines a further direction of all deliberations about each of these categories. The result of such a classification is not just a preliminary “objective” division of the material into groups for further analysis, but rather ready-made functional statements, difficult to free from due to connotations of some words that direct our thinking. Authoritative linking of different deposits’ functions with different spheres of social reality results in a situation when conclusion precedes evidence.

This classification is also a conspicuously intuitive one – it has been inferred from *a priori* assumed premises. One of them is a well-established conviction that silver as such was a value of itself, an object of common desire and embodiment of wealth which determined the social position of its owner. Thus its accumulation and hiding “had to” have an economic basis. It is a classic transfer of the mentality of contemporary people – used to judging social status by the amount of accumulated wealth – onto the distant past. The second implicit consequence of the above division is a belief that all the “hoards” that were potentially “recoverable” were actually supposed to be recovered, and that it was only due to some unexpected coincidence that their owners were prevented from doing so. Proponents of such a view seem to be convinced that, like today, also a thousand years ago nobody sane would voluntarily get rid of an accumulated fortune which gives (hence has “always” given) a sense of power and secures the owner’s future. Such commonsensical categories of thinking about the Early Middle Ages obviously determine the results of deposits’ classification.

Labels like “deposits of the economic type” or “deposits of the cult type” leave little room for manoeuvre. They result in a closed cycle of thinking, in which the used terms direct our research, which, in turn, confirms the terminology. And every attempt to break this vicious circle raises a psychologically understandable, though methodologically unjustified, opposition. Scholars usually concentrate on the first two of the mentioned categories, in the interpretation of which they do not allow for any considerations about behaviour that goes beyond the sphere governed by the market economy laws and fear of losing one’s fortune.

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<sup>46</sup> Bogucki, *Dlaczego* (footnote 1); a similar view was expressed by Suchodolski, *Kultura, czy ekonomiczna* (footnote 1) 186–188.





Let us now consider the *fragmentation of silver* which is traditionally recognized as a proof of marketisation of economy, i. e., of existence of an exchange system based on the assessment of products' and services' value by means of objectivised measure of weighted silver.<sup>47</sup> For the adherents of this theory it is obvious that "jewellery and coins were fragmented due to not magical but economic reasons".<sup>48</sup> Hence "there is no doubt that before they were deposited underground they had functioned as units of precious metal".<sup>49</sup> As a consequence, fragmentation of silver items is an unchanging argument used in support of the thesis that market mechanisms pervaded people's life already in the pre-states societies which used weighted silver as a means of payment in small commercial transactions.<sup>50</sup> Simplifying: it is believed that fragmentation of silver is a material proof of existence of a market where weighted silver served as small monetary units. A simplistic logic of economics is supposed to indicate that the more fragmented was the silver, the higher was its value in a given region, because "in order to make 'small' payments there was a need for lighter pieces of silver".<sup>51</sup> Occurrence of the weighted money in the area south of Baltic is believed to be a result of a long process of monetarization of economy that began in the 9th century in seaside emporia.<sup>52</sup>

If these "payment" interpretations were correct, the original form of the item (fragmentised during the transaction) would be insignificant and we would find in "hoards" a lot of fragments of products brought "from abroad". We rarely do so, however. Only a part of coins remained in their original form and the rest was laboriously processed into products that were in accordance with local aesthetic or, at least, melted down into bars. Therefore, putting of imported precious metals into local circulation was not direct and silver evidently underwent a preliminary selection. It causes considerable interpretative problems for scholars as an "ethnic" identifica-

<sup>47</sup> E. g. Stanisław Tabaczyński, *Archeologia średniowieczna. Problemy, źródła, metody, cele badawcze* (Wrocław 1987) 226 f.

<sup>48</sup> Suchodolski, *Kultowa, czy ekonomiczna* (footnote 1) 191.

<sup>49</sup> Adamczyk, *Płacidła w Europie Środkowej* (footnote 32) 90.

<sup>50</sup> E. g. Sebastian Brather, *Frühmittelalterliche Dirham-Schatz- und -Einzelfunde im südlichen Ostseeraum. Die Anfänge der Gewichtsgeldwirtschaft bei den Westslawen*. In: *Archäologie als Sozialgeschichte. Studien zu Siedlung, Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft im frühgeschichtlichen Mitteleuropa*. Festschrift Heiko Steuer, ed. Sebastian Brather/Christel Bückler/Michael Hoepfer. *Studia honoraria* 9 (Rahden 1999) 179–197, here 189.

<sup>51</sup> Bogucki, *Dlaczego* (footnote 1).

<sup>52</sup> Brather, *Frühmittelalterliche Dirham-Schatz- und -Einzelfunde* (footnote 50) 191.







tion of hack-silver had to be based mainly on the origin of coins found within deposits.<sup>53</sup>

Ibn Fadlan in his account of travel to Kama Bulgaria in 921/2 wrote that “Rus’ people” (i. e., Swedish merchants) “celebrated” an acquisition of every 10 thousand dirhams by making necklaces for their wives. It confirms our knowledge about, visible in sagas, social significance of precious metals in various “ring-like” forms, which “are continuously given and received as signs of hospitality, generosity, and loyalty. Underlying is the belief of magic power in the rings and precious metals”.<sup>54</sup> It was due to this “ethnic” fondness for simple, circular forms that practical in market use, convertible monetary silver was substituted with a form which was unpractical in commercial transactions but in accordance with standards applied in a completely different, non-market, sphere of precious metals circulation. Almost all other precious metal items imported “from abroad” underwent similar processing.

In the second half of the 10th century tons of precious metals – stolen, extorted and bought during distant expeditions – were still flowing into the Baltic region. However, we seldom find them in their original form, i.e., as church utensils, jewellery, book fittings, weapons etc. Therefore, the process of destructing their culturally identifiable form by melting them down and/or reforging had to take place either already before, or immediately after, they arrived “home”, i. e. before the precious metal was incorporated into local circulation or hidden. Hundreds of tons (!) of jewellery, liturgical items and coins<sup>55</sup> acquired in almost all parts of Europe underwent laborious processing which was supposed to adapt them to local needs, i. e., to turn them into a socially acceptable form. Such culturally “familiarized” silver was further chopped into smaller pieces. This effort, redundant from a purely market point of view, indicates clearly that explaining the fact of fragmentation solely by an economic function of precious metals does not

<sup>53</sup> Cf. James Graham-Campbell, Some archaeological reflections on the Cuerdale hoard. In: *The Vikings*, ed. Robert T. Farrell (Chichester 1987) 32–41; id., *The Viking-age gold and silver of Scotland (AD 850–110)* (Edinburgh 1995).

<sup>54</sup> Margaret Gaimster, Money and media in Viking Age Scandinavia. In: *Social approaches to Viking studies*, ed. Ross Samson (Glasgow 1991) 113–122, here 118.

<sup>55</sup> Thomas S. Noonan, Dirham exports to the Baltic in the Viking age. Some preliminary observations. In: *Commentationes de nummis saeculorum IX–XI in Suecia repertis* N. S. 6. Sigtuna papers, ed. Kenneth Jonsson/Britta Malmer (Stockholm, London 1990) 251–257, here 256) has estimated the number of the Samanid dirhams (alone) that flowed into Northern and Central Europe during the 10th century at around 50–100 million units. It would be an equivalent of 150–300 tons of silver (Brather, *Frühmittelalterliche Dirham-Schatzfunde* [footnote 31] 116).





clarify the phenomenon or, at least, does not clarify it fully. At the same time, a large quantity of hack-silver finds in the analysed area indicates that we are dealing with a socially significant phenomenon.

Scholars interested in hack-silver deposits are particularly fascinated with extremely small fragments (down to 0.11 grams). Their size is supposed to indicate the value of precious metals on the regional market. What is conspicuous in the relevant publications is a notoriously unchanging practice of printing histograms presenting the quantitative dominance of these smallest pieces. The fact that they constitute a larger part of the total number of silver finds at the given area is believed to prove the region's higher marketisation level. In fact, however, these statistics result in nothing but a trivial conclusion that when you begin to cut silver into pieces then the number of small bits has to grow, while – of large ones – to decrease. So eagerly published graphs illustrating the size of separate weight classes, are typical exponential functions which do not inform about anything but the fact that the degree of silver's fragmentation is only a function of time and/or work expenditure.

Scholars convinced that the early medieval economy of the Baltic region was marketised to a considerable extent, believe that the presence of a variety of small bits of silver indicates regional differences in the silver's value. The very fact that some of those pieces weight as little as 0.1 gram, however, directs my attention to a non-economic interpretation. In my opinion, it would be difficult to imagine the early medieval transactions that would require such a precise measurement of products' value, not to mention that using such small bits would demand not only an excellent sight but also some instruments (tweezers, special box etc.). Such a super-precise weighing and sorting of precious metals' pieces would have had an economic justification only in case of existence of equally precise and universally accepted standards of weights (to be closely followed in every single transaction). And the balances would have to be of equally high precision, which is not the case during the Viking Age.

The search for such weight systems has not brought expected results, which was visibly proved by Birgitta Hårdh's book published in 1996. It indicates the lack of unequivocal evidence of the existence of a pre-monetary market system that would allow for explaining the practice of cutting silver items and depositing their fragments by the influence of the mechanisms of monetary market (where weighted money was supposed to dominate). Search for proofs of the standardization of weight system in large areas of Scandinavia gave negative results. Neither is there any noticeable weight standardization of products of "standardized" form, i. e. bars or "ring" silver. Those which match expected classes of 50, 100 and 200 grams are very rare,





very early and they were classified as imports from the East.<sup>56</sup> Even very simple arm rings, sometimes called – by analogy with Scottish finds – “ring-money”, do not show any weight standardization.

This diversity is an undeniable proof of an absence of regional regulations of the system of evaluating precious metals. And no wonder, because it is hard to imagine how a system like this would function at that time at the supra-local scale; who and how would impose it; and – who and how would enforce it. Therefore, the situation of “natural” freedom characterized not only the pre-state period, but also the time of territorial states formation. Any standards of establishing the purchasing power of silver by its weighting could have had, at most, a strictly local nature, or even – they were applied only occasionally by merchants in need for a system of evaluation of their personal profits. However, they used various measures “brought” from the areas with a more developed market, where different systems of weights were also in use.

Hence, a lack of regularity in the parameters of early medieval weights found in Poland should not surprise us. Despite efforts on the part of numerous researchers, we are left with a rather unsatisfactory conclusion that “Unfortunately, it is impossible to fully correlate those systems [of early medieval weights] with, even more numerous, weight systems, because our knowledge about the latter is insufficient”.<sup>57</sup> It is problematic not only for Polish scholars. Studies of Heiko Steuer (1997) proved that even in case of weights of a highly standardized cubooctaedric form we can, at most, only notice an increase in their weight – from the earliest and lightest (below 4.25 grams), through transitional form (over 4.25 grams) to the latest and heaviest (over 10 grams). However, it is much too little to speak about any noticeable systems of weights. As it was long ago aptly stated by Ryszard Kiersnowski: “The notion of weight unit alone is not clear in the early medieval conditions”.<sup>58</sup> “Small units, used mainly in the internal exchange, have primarily reproduced the commonest silver coin of the given period – at first, Arabic dirham, then, European denarius”.<sup>59</sup>

These doubts become even more relevant when we consider earlier periods, in case of which scholars also tried to prove presence of various

<sup>56</sup> Birgitta Hårdh, *Silver in the Viking Age. A regional-economic study* (Stockholm 1996) 142.

<sup>57</sup> Krzysztof Wachowski, *Systemy odważników w Polsce średniowiecznej*, In: *Świat Słowian wczesnego średniowiecza*, ed. Marek Dworaczyk/Anna B. Kowalska/Sławomir Moździoch/Marian Rębkowski (Szczecin 2006) 359–364, here 359.

<sup>58</sup> Ryszard Kiersnowski, *Pieniądz kruszcowy w Polsce wczesnośredniowiecznej* (Warszawa 1960) 363.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 423.





metrology systems. Incorrect or far-fetched metrological interpretations of prehistoric phenomena<sup>60</sup> should make those who are especially determined to find irrefutable measurable evidence in the Early Middle Ages more careful in their analyses. Those attempts to capture measures used in prehistoric architecture, smithery or in the commodities exchange system were supposed to smooth away differences between contemporary European mentality based on pragmatic rationalism and, possibly difficult to understand, mentality of people who lived in a symbolic/magical reality. Transferring onto the distant past our own tendency and ability to standardize allows for diminishing the uneasiness caused by, difficult to systematize, diversity of the discovered phenomena.

Searching in various historical periods of non-Mediterranean *Barbaricum* for a supra-local collective normalizing consciousness or even “pre-monetary” systems, is a manifestation of, typical of archaeologists, tendency for looking even in very distant periods for the regularities that would allow researchers to control (otherwise difficult to systematize) diversity of the studied phenomena. It results from a fear that uncertainty, lack of clarity or even an equivocal nature of the obtained results are in some way scientifically defective as they prevent us from formulating unequivocal statements or precise assessment of phenomena under investigation. Seeking the evidence of normalizing practices we thus try to diminish the uncertainty that accompanies attempts to reconstruct past reality. These are practices that give illusion of our considerations being more scientific and potentially leading to more unambiguous conclusions.

Apart from illusory hopes for capturing some supra-local metrology standards, even studies on the range of market mechanisms were rather a disappointment. The main conclusion of the mentioned above studies of Birgitta Hårdh was a not very revealing statement that “on average, payments with the aid of means of payment were carried out at certain places or in certain circumstances, often with little impact on the surrounding areas”.<sup>61</sup> This incidental nature and/or spatial limitation of possible “monetary” transactions prove that there were no universal market standards and that full awareness of such standards could be present only among merchants who came from, or had regular contacts with, developed markets. They were the only ones who needed precise measurements of profits they

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<sup>60</sup> E. g. Alexander Thom, *Megalithic sites in Britain* (Oxford 1967); Mats Malmer, *Weight systems in the Scandinavian Bronze Age*. *Antiquity* 66, 1992/251, 377–388; Majolie Lenerz-de Wilde, *Prämonetäre Zahlungsmittel in der Kupfer-Bronzezeit Mitteleuropas*. *Fundberichte aus Baden-Württemberg* 20, 1995, 229–328.

<sup>61</sup> Hårdh, *Silver* (footnote 56) 182.





acquired during distant trade expeditions. Such distinct (from the local one) mentality of those professional “entrepreneurs” is wonderfully illustrated in abbot Ælfric’s account of a merchant who made successive transactions motivated solely by his estimated profit.<sup>62</sup>

Therefore, reasons behind the fragmentation of the early medieval silver in the Baltic area have to be sought not in the effects of market mechanisms but rather in conscious destruction of locally recognized, formal and symbolic value of precious metal items. The aim was not to precisely establish payments in small transactions but to destroy the form in which precious metal could function in political circulation, i.e. in the exchange of gifts (not of commodities). Thus it was a purposeful practice which is not an evidence of people’s participation in the profit-seeking trade transactions, but of their participation in redistributive transactions of strategic importance.<sup>63</sup> Today, it may be difficult to understand reasons behind such practices, because our “market” mentality is incompatible with the reality of the world subject to rules other than economic ones. We can only refer to theoretical arguments that allow for formulation of several interpretations that might be close to the Viking Age people’s way of thinking.

The simplest hypothesis suggests that hack-silver which we find is a manifestation of ostentation – inseparably connected with maintaining status – expressed through flamboyant generosity and exclusive consumption. An element of such behaviour is an ostentatious disregard, depreciation or even destruction of the items which are highly valued by the given society. Public cutting, bending or breaking of ornaments and silver bars was supposed to convince observers that the owner of those goods could afford such “waste” because his resources were large enough to allow him to maintain his status. We can refer to the same sphere of behaviour of people who publicly canvassed for social support when claiming that the fragmentation of silver was a preparatory action before giving it away to potential supporters. It is clearly said in the *Lay of Rig* emphasizing the generosity of a ruler who “broke rings” in order to give the silver away (*Rigsþula*, line 39). Or maybe hack-silver was scattered around for “common people”, who, obviously, did not deserve to be presented with items which could be ostentatiously shown in public or used in a ceremonial exchange of gifts. It could be as well a purposeful exclusion of a part of silver from the elitist political circulation by means of a one-time (not definitive, though) depreciation of its symbolic value and directing such devoid of value pieces of silver to enter circulation among people who did not par-

<sup>62</sup> Cf. an alternative interpretation, proposed by Bogucki, Dłaczego (footnote 1).

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Jørgen Jensen, *The prehistory of Denmark* (London 1982) 233 f.



ticipate in establishing power relations. Part of deposits of depreciated silver could be collections accumulated and stored by shrewd (and frequent) participants of such demonstrations of financial carelessness – which were, at the same time, manifestations of political foresight – of ruling elites.

Other interesting finds are “hoards” of laboriously depreciated silver hidden under floors of houses (in Poland, e. g., Obiszów and Opole<sup>64</sup>). It does not seem that these played a role of temporary deposits/hoards – as whole objects would serve this purpose much better – but the aim in this case was rather to place the depreciated silver in a location allowing for its magical protecting of the house’s inhabitants.

In an attempt to understand such practices – irrational from the economic point of view – we have to take into account a belief in symbolic/magical power of certain items that could be, e. g., “absorbed” from their previous owners.<sup>65</sup> Such power could be used or effectively destroyed by means of appropriate rituals, or even “buried” so that it could not be used by anyone in the future. Such beliefs can serve as an explanation of determination behind the *practices of depreciation*. These can be ordered in a series of consistently undertaken (not necessarily at the same time and not necessarily all in a row) actions. The easiest were (1) cutting, breaking, bending or even scratching of an ornament or coin. Some of them, however, were – whole or in parts – (2) melted down into bars or flat pieces to entirely erase their physical similarity with the original. Some of such “half-finished” products were also (3) flattened and/or cut into smaller pieces, which could be additionally (4) pecked/notched.<sup>66</sup>

This seeming “surplus” of destructive practices resulted from the fact that “there is never too much of magic” when we want to protect ourselves from “evil” influences or to deprive items belonging to some other person of their special properties. There is usually a variety of ritual practices that are employed to achieve this goal. They may even derive from some practical behaviour which with time lost its primary function. For instance, “to appease tensions that occurred during buying and selling there were created many rituals that produced an atmosphere of security which facilitated

<sup>64</sup> Stanisław Suchodolski, *Zasoby pieniężne “szarego człowieka” w Polsce wczesnośredniowiecznej*. In: *Człowiek w społeczeństwie średniowiecznym*, ed. Roman Michalowski (Warszawa 1997) 151–158, here 152f.

<sup>65</sup> Gurevich, *Wealth* (footnote 18).

<sup>66</sup> „Economists’ claim that “forging of precious metals into strips protected it well from losing, when needed, it was possible to cut off part of the strip or to forge it with another one”; Jacek Adamczyk, *Płacidła w Europie Środkowej i Wschodniej w średniowieczu* (Warszawa 2004) 114.







transaction. One such ritual of the Viking Age Scandinavians was making cuts into silver”, which derived from a simple method of judging the metal’s quality.<sup>67</sup>

To summarise these deliberations, which were made possible by early Scandinavian sources, I would like to emphasize once again my doubts concerning purely economic interpretations of early medieval phenomena of thesaurisation and depreciation that took place in the Baltic region. Those hypotheses are based mainly on a Marxist assumption that the economic sphere pervaded the pre-state societies, and on a conviction – derived from everyday practice of contemporary “market” society – that profit-oriented rationalism of people’s behaviour is something universal. It is an ahistorical approach which omits in its considerations a particularly significant symbolic/magical sphere. And without taking the latter into account we will be unable to understand many archaeologically retrievable phenomena.

Let us think about a definition of “market”. In a commonsensical interpretation it is simply a place and practice of exchange of diverse goods that takes place in all societies. However, if by “market” we understand mass participation of the given society’s members in an economy with regularised rules of exchange, where value of each product and service may be estimated by reference to socially objectivised measure of money (weighted or monetary), then, in the 9th and 10th centuries and at the beginning of the 11th century it would be hard to find in the Baltic region any central power strong enough (and with an infrastructure of social control effective enough) to impose systematic observance of any metrology standards and to enforce them by administrative control. In between these two extreme concepts of the market there is room for variety of intermediate possibilities which should be considered in every study in a particular historical context.

Based on the first of those two interpretations (and prevalent in literature) rationalistic/market explanations, although logical, are constructions that can be easily undermined. Simplifying: their authors claim that fragmentation of silver is a material evidence of effects of an “invisible hand” of market which requested converting of the value of all commodities into one universal commodity substituting money, i. e. silver. For those scholars, increase in the number of hack-silver finds dated to the turn of the millennia and the first half of the 11th century is an evidence of the intensification of this process, which was supposed to be a peculiar preparatory stage be-

<sup>67</sup> Duczko, Zebrać, zdeprecjonować (footnote 5) 213.





fore the introduction of monetary economy. Disappearance of such finds in the second half of the 11th century is explained by putting into circulation the large issues of state coins – in Poland, considerable minting activity of Bolesław Śmiały (1058–1079) was a breakthrough.

Such evolutionistic vision of a smooth transition to the market/monetary economy, though seemingly convincing and justified with some facts, has conspicuous flaws. We can ask why hack-silver finds date back as far as the so called period of the migration of peoples (i. e., the 5th–6th centuries) when it would be truly extravagant to look for a stable commodity market. It should be also clarified how, at least at the regional scale, the value of silver as a measurement for all other goods was established. Finally, authors of a traditional materialistic conception should answer the question why there was no analogical phenomenon in the neighbouring regions where at the similar time early medieval states also emerged, e. g. Bohemia or Hungary. If there it was possible for the state to “revolutionary” impose an application of the centrally enforced exchange systems, then why the area around the Baltic Sea should be different in this respect to go through some preparatory stages when fragmented silver is necessarily used.

Hypotheses of proponents of some particular system of pre-monetary money are based on an a priori assumption that an economic sphere there prevailed in pre-state societies. Meanwhile, without considering an important symbolic/magical sphere we will not understand many of the archaeologically traced phenomena. The fact that it is difficult to study this sphere and such investigation does not lead to any final conclusions does not excuse those who make simplifications which trivialize the intellectual richness of the early medieval world. Obviously, questioning of the hypotheses based on the premises of economic rationalism does by no means imply that they should be entirely substituted with a hypothesis ascribing everything to non-economic practices because “transactions have as their purpose the creation of new or maintenance of old relationships, as much as the procurement of the exchanged item or service”.<sup>68</sup> *Homo symbolicus* and *Homo oeconomicus* were two complementary sides of people’s mentality as much in the Early Middle Ages as in all other periods. The further into the past we move, the more difficult is the separation of the two and the more unsuccessful are the attempts to formulate universal and unequivocal explanations.

An absolutely dominant in a specialist literature conviction that characteristic features of the Early Middle Ages in the Baltic region had mainly

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<sup>68</sup> Samson, Economic anthropology (footnote 24) 90.





economic fundamentals in my opinion seems to be definitely too one-dimensional as it does not take into account regional specifics of historical conditions. Transfer of market mentality – which could have formed in *Byzantium*, caliphates, or maybe already also in developed post-Carolingian states – onto areas located outside a direct influence of civilisation derived from Roman traditions, is a too far-fetched simplification of deep cultural differences.

This obsessive concentration on the economic sphere denies the humanistic imperative of presenting the multidimensionality of the world with its fascinating cultural diversity, differentiation of normative patterns and a disturbing but always present measure of vagueness. An attempt to organize contemporary and past realities according to one's own cultural categories sadly narrows the horizon of observation eliminating everything "different". Past, present and future become one-dimensional, historical process narrowed to a linear trajectory and our studies are threatened with gross simplification.<sup>69</sup>



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<sup>69</sup> While writing this chapter I did not realize that in 2008 an anti-substantivist manifesto was edited by Dagfinn Skre as the second volume of the Kaupang series: Means of exchange. Dealing with silver in the Viking Age, ed. Dagfinn Skre. Kaupang Excavation project publication series 2 = Norske Oldfunn 23 (Århus 2008). However, the above text may partly serve as a discussion with views presented there by several authors.



