Chapter 11

Dirham Hoards from the Gulf of Finland Region

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There is an obvious connection between Viking Age trade routes and dirham hoards, despite the fact that, as noted by Sebastian Brather, the geographical distribution of the hoards does not necessarily provide any direct answers to questions concerning the trade.\(^1\) The Gulf of Finland is even today an important waterway between Russia and the rest of Europe, and its importance for the early connections between Sweden and Russia is attested by archaeological finds as well as historical sources like the *Russian Primary Chronicle*. The existence of several dirham hoards along the shores of the Gulf is hardly surprising; they are not numerous, however, and they are found mainly in Estonia. How to explain this situation?

We must begin by defining the minimum size of a hoard. The finds listed as hoards vary from fewer than a handful to thousands of coins. In principle, two coins or other objects hidden together form a hoard, as distinct from a single or cumulative find – and from a subjective point of view, even a single object can be classified as a “hoard.”\(^2\) A more practical interpretation is usually preferred, however. In two recent comprehensive surveys, only finds consisting of at least five coins have been accepted as hoards, and I have followed this principle here.\(^3\)

Finds from Russian Territory

The shortest route from Sweden to Staraya Ladoga was by way of the Gulf of Finland and the Neva and Volkhov rivers. Staraya Ladoga is also where the earliest dirham hoard in eastern Europe has been found. It consisted of 31 coins with a *terminus post quem* of 786. Another early hoard is known from Knya-shchina, a few kilometres from Staraya Ladoga, but here the coins were found on several occasions and only some of them were identified, so that it is not

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2 Mørkholm 1976.
quite certain whether all of the approximately 400 coins belonged to the same hoard. If they did, the *t.p.q.* was probably 809.⁴

In 1809 or 1810, a spectacular find was discovered in the Ladoga area: a dirham hoard weighing more than a hundred kilograms. It subsequently was dispersed and nothing is known of its dating.⁵ Large dirham hoards are, however, more typical of the tenth than the ninth century. There are also several other, much smaller hoards from the Volkov-Novgorod area.⁶

When we turn to the shores of the Gulf of Finland itself, we meet another early hoard. Found in Petrodvorets (Peterhof) some 30 kilometres west of St Petersburg, it contained at least 34 coins with a *t.p.q.* of 804.⁷ What is surprising is that no other coin hoards are known from the Russian coast of the Gulf from the ninth and tenth centuries. This presumably can be explained by the sparsity of the population in that area before c.1000.⁸ It may also be noted that there are no hoards with western coins from that area before the 1020s.⁹

Finds from Estonia

After Petrodvorets, the second-earliest hoard from the southern coast of the Gulf of Finland is the Kohtla find – the earliest dirham hoard from Estonia, with a *t.p.q.* of 837. According to Ivar Leimus’s recent *Sylloge*, there were 500–600 coins, of which 481 are known.¹⁰

There is probably also another Estonian find from the same time: in 1962, the Saaremaa museum acquired a private collection containing a parcel of 87 dirhams, apparently a hoard or part of a hoard with a *t.p.q.* of 837. The hoard may well have been found on the island of Saaremaa itself, in which case it does not come from the Gulf of Finland region.¹¹

No other ninth-century dirham hoards are known from the northern coast of Estonia, with the exception of a very unusual find from Haljala: a necklace with six golden pendants, including one ‘Abbāsid dinar from 864/5.¹² The two

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⁴ Noonan 1981: 82, 84.
⁵ Markov 1910: 130f.
⁷ Brather 1997: 130.
⁸ Tallgren 1938: 98ff.
¹⁰ Leimus 2007: 12ff.
¹¹ Leimus 2007: 15f.