

Offa's Dyke Journal



A Journal for Linear Monuments,
Frontiers & Borderlands Research

Volume 7

Edited by Howard Williams

Aims and Scope

Offa's Dyke Journal is a peer-reviewed venue for the publication of high-quality research on the archaeology, history and heritage of linear monuments, frontiers and borderlands. The editors invite submissions that explore dimensions of Offa's Dyke, Wat's Dyke and the 'short dykes' of western Britain, including their life-histories and landscape contexts. *ODJ* will also consider comparative studies on the material culture and monumentality of land divisions, boundaries, frontiers and borderlands from elsewhere in Britain, Europe and beyond from prehistory to the present day. We accept:

1. Notes and Reviews of up to 3,000 words
2. Interim reports on fieldwork of up to 5,000 words
3. Original discussions, syntheses and analyses of up to 10,000 words

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Front cover: Detail of John Speed's map of Flintshire from 1610 showing the earliest cartographic depiction of Offa's Dyke (private collection)

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University of
Chester

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Viking Wirral in Public Archaeology and History

An interview with Clare Downham and Paul Sherman

This interview which took place on 4 November 2025 with Clare Downham (CD) and Paul Sherman (PS) with editor Howard Williams (HW) discussed initiatives and challenges in promoting knowledge of the Viking Age in the Wirral. This frontier zone marked the boundary between England and Wales by land and a maritime boundary between England and the Irish Sea. As such it is often assigned a marginal rather than a central place in narratives of British and Irish history.

Keywords: Irish Sea, liminal, public archaeology, Viking Age, Wirral

Introduction

HW: Welcome! Let's begin with brief introductions to your backgrounds and expertise.

CD: I'm professor of medieval history in Irish Studies at the University of Liverpool, but I did my PhD research on vikings in Britain and Ireland, so I've always been interested in cross currents straddling the Irish Sea. And being based now in Merseyside, my interests are drawn into how this region is involved in a network of contacts in different directions.

PS: I'm a heritage consultant involved in several companies. Practical Heritage and Conservation Services has been involved in various commercial projects. I am also involved in NW Heritage CIC, which is a community non profit. So, between them I have been involved in various commercial and community-based projects across the region. It was with the first company that I first got involved in a Wirral based project with Clare and also archaeologist Rob Philpott. We were commissioned to work on reporting on 'The Search for the Battle of Brunanburh' project for Wirral Borough Council and that was around 2020/2021 (Sherman *et al.* 2020).

COVID made things a little difficult on that project which lasted around 16 weeks. Since then, our community non profit organisation community interest company has also worked on various projects relating to Wirral's Viking past amongst others.

When Sefton Council had a Heritage and Archaeology Task Group, I was a regular participant on the panel. Others as I recall included Sue Stallibrass, Mark Adams and Rob Philpott. It was a means to discuss various projects across the region and it was here that I first met David Jordan from Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) who was a guest one time. This meeting which led to a collaboration between NW Heritage and LJMU whereby we provide training opportunities for students and in return we get to use LJMU facilities and equipment. Since 2017, we've been expanding on that and

we are now working on a variety of projects with LJMU students. More recently, we have been running field schools for the University of Liverpool as well, working on two major sites in the English North West: Poulton Hall at Bromborough on the Wirral, and Lathom House near Ormskirk. They are both sites that have seen considerable action during the English Civil War, but they are also of much wider historical interest as well.

How has the story of early medieval Wirral been told

HW: To set the scene for your work on Wirral, how would we capture the back story here of the historiography of early medieval Wirral? In other words, how is it seen in the context of national histories and long-term local narratives about the Viking Age or the Early Middle Ages more broadly?

PS: I recall as a young teen at school in West Lancashire, just a few miles away from Lathom, where we now have one of our field schools. Considering that Lathom was the 'northern court' and home of Sir Thomas Stanley, the most powerful man in England after his stepson, King Henry VII, as far as history classes were concerned, Lathom did not exist, it never got mentioned. As far as my school history teacher was concerned the North West in the early medieval period was simply considered to be wasteland and forest. The perception being that not a lot happened there from an historical perspective. In English literature I remember reading *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in which the Wirral is mentioned: 'in the wyldrenesse of wyrale wonde ther bot lyte' (In the wilderness of Wirral dwelt there but few). That captures a sense of how the history of the region was portrayed to me at that particular time. However, more recently, I have come to believe that the Wirral held a much greater significance than either my school history teacher or the author of *Sir Gawain* afforded it.

CD: There are two points there: the marginalisation of regional histories and the lack of materials we have to work with. Firstly, the way that schools adhere to the National Curriculum which is focused on general national narratives means that regional perspectives are often marginalised. While there are some teachers who are proactive in trying to bring local history and archaeology into the classroom, it does require an extra level of effort and that raises the question: should one of the things that we work on as academics be to create resources to help teachers if we truly care about promoting local heritage? The other thing, particularly for the Viking Age is just that there isn't a lot for the historian to work with, and that can be a problem. So, when we're talking about viking settlement in the North West, everybody goes to this one recorded event of AD 902 (the expulsion of vikings from Dublin). This is often seen as the starting gun for viking settlement across the North West because we don't have many other references to viking activity in the region. Of course, there is other evidence to pick through and evaluate but nothing so prominent and the broader task requires dialogue with expert historians and archaeologists.

One dimension of local history I've contributed to has been the controversial claim that the Battle of Brunanburh in AD 937 was located on Wirral when many experts believe it was fought in other locations (Downham 2021). Scholarly discussions have often focused on place names and the etymology of the name Bromborough. Yet to understand why this area was strategically important is key to the argument. To understand that, it is necessary to explore the landscape and archaeological evidence.

PS: I recently learned there might be moves to include more local history in the school curriculum so maybe that's a constructive direction (Diver 2025).

HW: So, you get this traditional sense that there's a national story and you may have a local illustrative example at best, or it's just not mentioned, but there's no coherent story. The North West in general, and the Wirral in particular, are considered a place in between.

PS: And yet being a place in between makes the Wirral particularly important, located as it is between the Mersey and the Dee, in between England and Wales, part of it in between the English kingdom and, for a time, an Hiberno-Norse enclave. It's 'in-between' status made it important in trade from both Dublin and York. So, located between political territories and on trade routes across the Irish Sea, it was a significant liminal space. Indeed, this situation can be traced back far earlier than the early medieval period.

Recent work on Viking Wirral

HW: So how can we look afresh at early medieval Wirral? It sounds as if foregrounding its liminal status is key.

PS: Yes, I think we need to look at it afresh and to stop thinking of it as it was in older history books. This is where new archaeological evidence is now starting to filter through and transform our understanding of the historical narrative for this part of the world.

CD: I agree, I think it's important to think of the area as a sort of crossroads and its liminality. There are certainly points in time when the region becomes very significant. For example, King Edward the Elder reportedly dies at Farndon in 924. Then, in 937 there is the Battle of Brunanburh. At other times the significance of the region has been downplayed partly because the main narratives we have for the development of the English kingdom were very much Wessex driven. The historical sources for the Wirral area are sparse, Work on place names from the era of Dodgson (1970) onwards has been driving forward the research agenda and now too archaeology. A lot of the credit here goes to local enthusiasts, so not people who are trained as historians, including Stephen Harding (2000, 2002). He's obviously got academic interests but has come from a non-historian's perspective. He has gathered this data together and stepped into the breach because the professional historians haven't really dealt with this material and the picture from archaeology is still emerging.

HW: We know about a number of individual Viking-period archaeological sites (see Griffiths 2015), notably the coastal site of Meols (Griffiths *et al.* 2007) and the settlement evidence from Irby and Moreton (Philpott and Adams 2010: 209–218; Philpott 2015). There are also Viking-period carved stone monuments (e.g. Bailey 2010; White 2015; Williams 2016), and metal-detector finds of hoards and stray finds (e.g. Graham-Campbell and Philpott 2009; Kershaw 2015), but also Victorian-era traditions of Viking presence on Wirral.

CD: Yes, there's a lot of folklore about Vikings by which I mean both old folklore and new folklore. It's tricky to deal with. I don't want to quash local people's enthusiasm, it is often the folklore that fascinates them. For instance, the idea that the rocky outcrop at Thurstaston was a site dedicated to the Norse god Thor is the result of nineteenth-century antiquarian musings on the place-name (which is derived from Thorstein nor Thor) (Picton 1877). Likewise, locals have relayed to me that a 'Viking sword' had been found on the foreshore at Heswall which is not the case (an item was recovered of much later date). Another recent conjuring based on musings and very little evidence is the claim that a Viking ship lies hidden under the car park of the Railway Inn, Meols. Those are the kind of fables – both old and recent – that animate people. Interest in early medieval Wirral is linked to local pride and enthusiasm to learn more which we can and should encourage. Equally, we must be wary that folklore creates another historiography which can perpetuate misinformation and sometimes full-blown fantasies.

HW: The Wirral's Viking heritage is a heady mix of genuine historical, archaeological and toponomastic gems, and now genetic discourses, plus some rich fables of nineteenth-century Northern antiquarianism (see also Griffiths and Harding 2015: 1–8). In broad terms, academics have a reputation of being patronising towards local people and not taking seriously their stories. But equally, we have a responsibility to not indulge contrived narratives whilst simultaneously fostering local enthusiasm in history and archaeology. So, how do we best go about doing that: channeling and supporting the public whilst challenging stark 'fake history'?

CD: In that regard, I think the stories are interesting to study on their own merits, as stories that are an interesting phenomenon, but not to treat them as historical enquiry. It reflects the fact that people are filling in the gaps because they haven't got anything that addresses their local narrative directly. The folklore responds to landscapes and histories academic scholars have been unable, or unwilling, to explore. The same applies for other localities. For example, some of the earliest publications in Scottish history drew from folklore (Downham 2011). The valorisation of oral narratives and traditions was a reaction to the dominance of Anglocentric narratives of Britain and Britishness. In that light, folklore in the English North West, and Wirral in particular, might, at least in part, be a reaction to the marginalisation of selected peoples and themes in authorised historical narratives.

New directions for Wirral's Viking heritage

HW: This leads us to consider ways forward for Wirral's Viking heritage.

PS: The key moment for me as regards being involved in the way forward with Wirral's early medieval heritage was my involvement in producing the Wirral Borough Council report into a large number of metal-detected finds from central Wirral and their significance especially relating to Viking Age activity on the Wirral. That's when myself, Rob Philpott and Clare produced the report for Wirral Council on the relationship of the metal detected finds and the postulated location of the Battle of Brunanburh. This involved collating around two thousand metal-detected finds that had been recovered over multiple decades in the locality. The bulk of these were from a single field, which is just unparalleled anywhere in the region for metal-detected finds. However, there were issues – the recording techniques were in some cases non-existent and the collection was the result of over twenty years detecting with some finds recorded without any meaningful context whatsoever.

However, a fair proportion of the finds were found to be modern era in any case. In addition many of these finds had been stored in plastic bags for many years, resulting in severe corrosion and disintegration. So, when we actually came to start to catalogue all the finds for the Council report, unfortunately, several significant finds had not survived. Notably, there were two early medieval arrowheads that were lost because of poor storage, which was a shame. Here are two more from the project that are in a much better state of preservation, a Jessop type T2 and a type T1 (Figure 1). A striking range of early medieval lead gaming pieces or weights were recovered (Figure 2).

There were several recommendations put in that report about the collection and its ongoing care as well as how the group should proceed in future as regards finds recording. There was also an issue concerning claims that had previously been made by certain members of the metal detecting group that had been rather far-fetched. As a result, there appeared to be a stigma surrounding working with the detectorists among academics and professionals. One key example of the problems involved was when some of the metal detectorists appeared on regional television and in newspapers making claims that could never stand up to any scrutiny and therefore caused the group significant reputational damage. There was, for example, a claim that a piece of incised lead sheet was a runic character somehow related to the Battle of Brunanburh! In this circumstance, it is no wonder that many were reluctant to engage with the group.

The submission of that report marked the end of my contractual obligations and at that point it would have been quite easy to also distance myself from further involvement. However, I recall having discussions with Rob Philpott on this matter and we came to the conclusion that the project started by this group had the potential to be of immense value in terms of advancing the knowledge of Wirral's heritage and therefore it was too important to walk away from. We decided that it would be better to work with them



Figure 1: Two early medieval tanged arrowheads from the main finds site of Wirral Archaeology's 'Search for the Battle of Brunanburh' project. Above: Beeton 2022a. Below: Beeton 2025a.





Figure 2: Some of the early medieval lead gaming pieces and weights from the main find site (Photograph: Paul Sherman 2025)

and provide assistance wherever possible rather than distance ourselves, a ‘them and us’ situation that is often heard when discussing interaction between metal detectorists and archaeologists.

The group themselves realised the problem and a restructuring of the CIC’s board resulted in a renaissance and at this point it was where Rob and I felt we could fruitfully invest time building an ongoing constructive relationship with them that has continued to this day. Now the group are working scientifically, seeking professional advice wherever needed, producing high quality geospatial finds data, and recording all finds with the Portable Antiquities Scheme.

The group, now called Wirral Archaeology CIC, has a new project: ‘Poulton Hall and its environs’. The work already carried out by the group appears to show that the area of Wirral around Poulton Hall was of considerable significance in Wirral’s past. They have recovered some significant Roman and medieval finds. They are also actively raising money to pay for ongoing research into the archaeology of the site. I have just completed the first phase of work on the project. This involved landscape interpretation of the area and carrying out a range of geophysical surveys followed by the excavation of a small number of trial trenches. Two of the questions the current research seeks to address include: ‘is there any evidence to demonstrate that Poulton Hall may have once been a burh or similar early medieval fortified site?’ A second research question is: ‘what evidence exists to support the theory that there was once a masonry castle on the site?’ Wirral Archaeology have just applied for funding towards the next stage of that work. So things are starting to move forward in that respect.

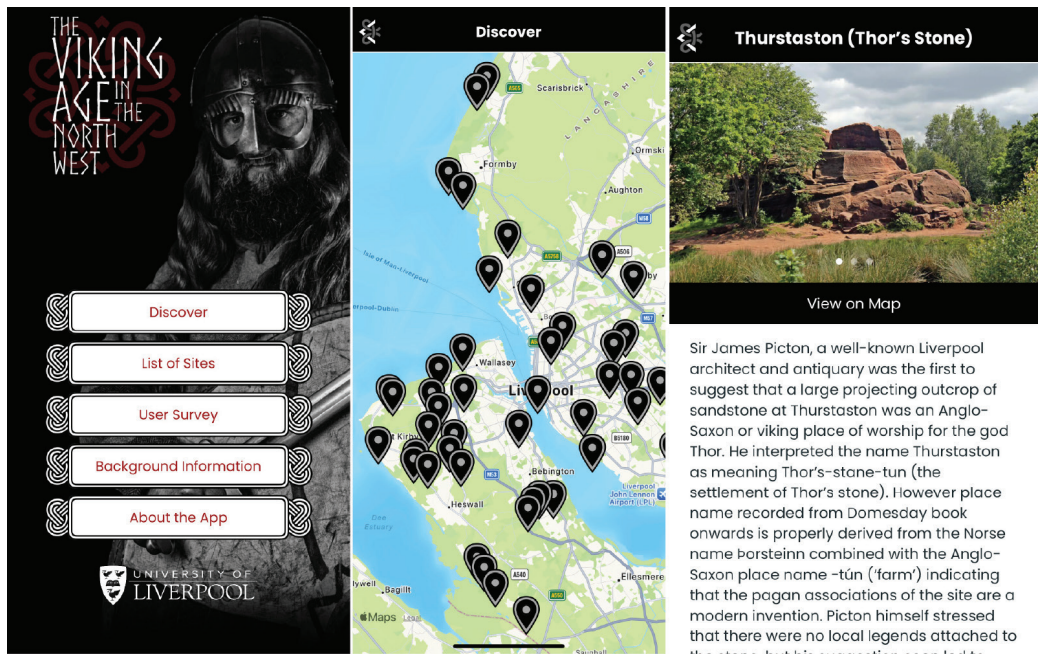


Figure 3: Screen shots from *The Viking Age in the North West* app. Left: the opening screen, middle: the map, right: a typical site entry

HW: This is an example of the benefits of sustained dialogue between professionals and avocational enthusiasts dedicated to exploring a specific locality. What other ways have you been working to improve public understanding of the Viking heritage of the region?

CD: A free smartphone app called *The Viking Age in the North West* was developed over the last six years by the University of Liverpool (Figure 3).¹ Initially it focused on twenty-five sites in Merseyside and then in 2022 it was expanded to draw in a selection of sites along the coasts of Lancashire and Cumbria. Although this represents a fraction of the locations for which there is evidence relating to vikings, the aim was to provide a series of heritage routes highlighting the variety of evidence that has survived (place names, folklore, sculpture and discoveries). The goals of the app are twofold. First, it is to enhance knowledge and appreciation of the heritage that is on people's doorstep. Second, it aims to promote that story to the outside world. I think that is quite important if we want heritage to be cared for, it has to mean something to people. This app promotes awareness and encourages people with an interest in Wirral and the Viking Age to visit sites. Obviously, academics tend to speak directly to few people

¹ <https://liverpool.cloud.panopto.eu/Panopto/Pages/Viewer.aspx?id=a110b9f1-030f-4400-8dbd-b07000ff4ff9&start=7.560603>. As a spin off from the app, viking colouring sheets were created for schools during COVID: <https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/humanities-and-social-sciences/research/projects/viking-colouring-sheets/>

beyond their circle of colleagues and the dedicated local enthusiasts. The app is pitched at the many more people who might simply want to know a little extra about history and archaeology on Wirral.

On the app there are places that people can go and visit. It can help contribute to quality of life for people to get out and visit sites of interest at minimal cost and to develop an appreciation of their environment and surroundings (Sayer 2024). This complements the more hands-on approach that Paul has with the metal detector users. In addition, we have done some community engagement activities using the app. This included a group cycle tour of sites on the Wirral in 2019 as part of the ‘Future Yard’ music festival in Birkenhead.² In addition, there have been a range of other activities we have instigated or participated in to promote Wirral’s Viking heritage, including stalls at local viking festivals.

We have also worked with reenactment groups who are really enthusiastic people. One example Dave Capener, who is one of the Wirhahl Skip Felagr reenactors. He’s self published (Capener 2014) with a military background and he is passionate about promoting the Battle of Brunanburh project. Recently he’s been working on evaluating potential beacon sites on the Wirral as a signalling system in the Viking Age. His approach is welcome: given his knowledge of military strategy and how to read a landscape. In contrast, I’m addressing the written sources. Together, we’ve done talks as a duo at the Bloom Building in Birkenhead to raise funds for local mental health charities, and reenactors also came along in kit. It was just a really nice way of communicating the local heritage to a local audience. But while the Viking past can be an effective way of engaging with people, there can be a problem of perception in that members of the public who might think that academics are remote and arrogant. Yet we can learn from each other and draw on the expertise and insights of those from non-academic backgrounds. In that sense, I totally learn from Dave Capener because he reads the landscape as somebody who’s got a military background and can interpret things in a way I have not been trained to do. So, I think there just has to be that kind of mutual respect for each person’s area of knowledge and what they can bring to the table.

While there are sometimes arrogant behaviours in academia by those who regard those without academic training as providing limited or no insights in exploring the past, there are also levels of arrogance among some avocational enthusiasts who believe there is no need for any kind of specialised training. In our interactions, that was evident in the original name of the metal detector group who defined themselves as ‘archaeologists’ by calling themselves ‘Wirral Archaeology’. I think one of their early press releases claimed they were not metal detectorists at all but ‘semi-professional’ archaeologists! And yet there was no evidence they had participated and completed any training or qualifications to call themselves that in the media. Most significantly, the methods they employed didn’t justify that. In short, we need mutual respect, transparency and

² <https://news.liverpool.ac.uk/2019/08/09/explore-viking-wirral-on-wheels-dr-clare-downham-future-yard/>

accountability for academics and professionals in order to work with stakeholders. Together, experience and background from a range of backgrounds and perspectives can help to provide a set of tools to explore Wirral in the Viking Age.

PS: The arrogance that Clare was just referring to is certainly no longer present within the reorganised Wirral Archaeology CIC. The restructuring of their board I referred to earlier certainly put paid to that and as a group they have made enormous progress in producing data that will advance the history of the Wirral. For example, I know they have members currently translating and transcribing previously unknown medieval documents from the Poulton Hall archives. Overall, whether looking at archaeological or documentary research, this project has the potential to become a great example of what can be achieved through collaboration.

HW: It seems the best way to approach such groups is to curb unbridled and misdirected enthusiasm, but also to respect their local knowledge, whether it's reenactment groups, local parish councils or any other group of local people.

CD: I suppose in a way it's a reflection that people do feel passionate about local history and heritage, but then there is also this idea of who owns it. Sometimes there's accusations of exclusivity of certain local groups and then obviously there's voices from outside the groups who object to the way stories are being told about their local area. Heritage is always about our times, and it is often contested in some fashion, and that certainly applies to Viking Wirral. There is comedy value in small groups with rivalries and tensions: that's human nature. The same thing happens within academic communities: that's just humans and politics, and academics can be just as bad as anyone else! It can be a distraction but on the whole it's a good thing because it shows that people care and if people don't care, then you've got a problem. If people care, then that's just a case of how you direct it and how you bring the different stakeholders round the table and who wants to be part of a progressive conversation and who doesn't.

HW: With the challenges overcome and new products created involving local people and building momentum for community participation in Wirral's Viking heritage, what do you feel is the best way forward?

CD: I think when you've got like a lot of public interest like that there, there is the risk that you can therefore get quite a lot of misinformation circulating. To that end, one thing I'd like to do more of is to work with local school teachers to reach young people and engage the next generations in local heritage. This is really important since, as we are aware, vikings have been co-opted and manipulated in popular culture and political discourses on a global scale but certainly also in the UK. Making sure that good reliable information is disseminated at grassroots level to young people is a key way to ensure misinformation doesn't gain traction and instead we give people clear, engaging, fun and helpful information about the Viking-period in their localities. This certainly applies to Wirral.

PS: Following up on the point about getting involved with schools, I think the things that I've picked up on when I've visited schools is the lack of funding. The teachers that I've spoken to have remarked that their history budget amounts to pennies per child per year. So, when the teacher is going to touch on a particular subject, for instance, the Viking Age in their locality, the Viking Age being a core topic within Key Stage 2 of the UK's school curriculum, what resources are the teachers going to look to? They generally have next to nothing themselves and have to rely on Google to help them scratch together whatever they can find.

One solution would be if we could work with teachers to produce a learning pack to go out to schools, right across the peninsula. Perhaps one version for junior schools and a more detailed one for senior schools, This could help to bring Wirral's diverse heritage to the fore for future generations. Within the history that's covered at school, such a resource would be a big bonus and possibly the kind of thing that could be achieved through external funding, such as, the National Lottery Community Fund. Widely distributed to schools and communities, it could help get grassroots engagement with history and heritage.

CD: That leads on to a second point though, and I think when there's ever any kind of dissemination, it's really important that you have a conversation with teachers to understand what they want. We should be having more conversations with people outside academia about what they would like before we try to offer solutions, or else it's not going to work. The risk otherwise is that we are creating a resource which is just going to sit there and not really be used. The children and teachers, as well as the entire school community, need to feel like they're part of that process. And I know co-creation is a bit of a buzzword right now, but I think that is the approach we need to this.

To be fair, there is already some co-creation. But if there's the interest and enthusiasm, then there may need to be more. I'm not quite sure how best to identify and engage different stakeholder groups but school teachers are an obvious one. Groups like the Viking reenactors should also be approached: they see part of their job as knowledge dissemination. It might be good to actually have conversations with different stakeholders to say what do you want from us and on what can we create together.

PS: I agree. And the way research is going on the Wirral at the moment, there's a lot of raw data that soon will start to drip feed into the historical narrative for the area now that the Wirral Archaeology group is organised and every single find is being geolocated and recorded correctly. They are contributing data to the PAS scheme that can already be shared in the community and far beyond. These include Iron Age and Roman finds from central Wirral which are really important in their own right, as well as some significant early medieval artefacts. For example, we have a 'boat brooch' that almost certainly came from Central Europe and dates to around 800 to 700 BC (Figure 4). It raises the question of what is that doing in the middle of Wirral? The group also have



Figure 4: Iron Age copper-alloy 'boat or leech' brooch, dated c. 800-700 BC (Carey 2025)

a considerable number of Roman finds as well as some fascinating ones from the early medieval period.

In terms of early medieval finds, there are exotic items including this Sasanian drachm of Khusrau II (reigned AD 590-628) (Figure 5). There is another Sassanian coin and this Abbasid dirham of the caliph al-Mahdi dating to 775/776 (Figure 6). There are also finds from later in the early medieval period with links to Europe, such as this omega brooch, dating to c. AD 1000-1300 (Figure 7) as well as a copper-alloy spangle (Figure 8). Whilst the PAS entry for this item states 'They are often found in burials of the later fifth to later seventh centuries...', examples of both objects are also often found in European contexts linked to Baltic contact hundreds of years later than this. They are both comparatively rare in this country but similar examples have been recovered by metal detectorists in association with other Baltic derived material at a site just north of the River Mersey as well as from sites along the River Ribble (P. Sherman - personal comment, research ongoing).

As individual finds, they are interesting but perhaps somewhat inexplicable. But as an assemblage, you start to put things together and realise some particular sites such as this have been attracting people and their associated objects from a wide geographical area. The question remains: why were they all coming here? Currently, I think the



Figure 5: Early medieval silver Sasanian drachm of Khusrau II (Beeton 2022b)



Figure 6: Early medieval Abbasid silver dirham issued by Caliph al-Mahdi (Beeton 2021)



Figure 7: A copper-alloy medieval Modvinian penannular (omega) brooch, dating to c. AD 1000–1300 (Beeton 2014)



Figure 8: Copper-alloy spangle, possibly fifth or sixth century AD (Beeton 2025b)

answer relates to a potentially important central place, the area around Bromborough. From the finds data alone it certainly appears to be of some significance during the Roman period (and perhaps even earlier), but it also appears to have been important during the early medieval period too. In the context of the previous discoveries of the nineteenth century from Meols interpreted as a beach market, we might now suggest people were coming in to Meols and then perhaps also moving down the peninsula to this second significant location around Bromborough towards Chester. Between Meols and Chester, in the centre of Wirral, the area around Poulton Hall might well have held some significance, perhaps even of power and influence, as revealed by this assemblage. Further research may well answer some of the questions surrounding such finds.

A broader context for Wirral's Viking heritage

HW: Is one of the biases of the discussion of Viking Wirral the idea that Chester is not part of this phenomenon, being a burh established by Aethelflaed and therefore someone seen as integrated into the emerging English kingdom? Certainly in terms of its modern civic identity and uses of its Roman and (to a lesser extent) medieval past, Chester sees itself as set apart from Wirral.

CD: I agree. We're reliant on modern perceptions of regions, politics and localities which can hinder cross fertilisation with a broader regional picture. So, we often face quite a siloed approach to some of the local studies. That's where outside stakeholders getting involved can help break down these arbitrary divides and provide an overview on Wirral and its connectivities. By way of example, the Museum of Liverpool is currently hosting the Treasures exhibition which show cases Liverpool and Merseyside, including Wirral, within a broader picture of national and international connections across Northwest England, North Wales and beyond. This is good, but, I agree that there hasn't been too much discussion across boundaries to date.

HW: That links to a point I've made on Viking heritage and history elsewhere: we perhaps need to think of Viking-period heritage as 'glocal': tacking between localised and international perspectives, and in local events many scales of Viking heritage collide and interact (Williams 2024; see also Williams and Clarke 2020). This leads me to ask what you feel are the wider implications of the work you have both been doing on Wirral and the English North West more broadly for other parts of what are considered the 'Viking world', especially given the persistent co-opting 'the Vikings' by global white supremacist and ethnonationalist movements and discourses?

CD: I think the relationship of local stories to international connections and wider historical processes is what makes the Viking age exciting to local people, is that their local story does fit into a much bigger story, and that's exciting to them, although obviously a lot of people think that the story just goes back to Scandinavia, whereas I think there's

some more communication to do. It's the breadth of the Viking trading routes and cross connections between that brings the story together. I remember I was giving a talk once where I mentioned finds of Arabic dirhams from the Viking Age in North West England and one of the members of the audience just wasn't having it, but I wasn't making this up. They just didn't like the idea that there were these trade links with the Middle East in the early Middle Ages. To me however, that makes the Viking Age more exciting: it's the big-picture that surely makes local heritage all the more important because it was part of this great field of endeavour. I feel this awareness of interconnections is something that should be embraced and promoted for every part of the Viking world.

PS: And people want to embrace it because I think thanks to media, certainly in recent years, Vikings have become more popular among the general public on a global scale. I always think back to the British Museum 'Vikings: Life and Legend' exhibition from 2014. I remember Gareth Williams mentioning that while that exhibition was on a small boy came to him and said 'Vikings rock – Saxons suck' and he said that stuck with him. When Gareth told me that, it stuck with me as well and of course in the years since then, with Vikings increasingly portrayed in the media, they have become more popular. This maybe only because they have seen the *Vikings* series on television or they've read one of Bernard Cornwell's books, or whatever it might be, but it is still a type of interaction that's bringing people in to take a little bit more interest in early medieval history when they hear the word 'Viking'.

HW: Bringing things back to Viking Wirral, I would be interested in your views regarding the choice of the 2023 film based on Bernard Cornwell's books: *The Last Kingdom: Seven Kings Must Die* (Bazalgette 2023) in which Wirral, and Bromborough specifically, is portrayed as the location for the Battle of Brunanburh.

CD: Wirral Archaeology were very effective in engaging Bernard Cornwell. They invited him to the Wirral, showed him finds. Cornwell had long chats with Dave Capener, who explained his military vision of how the battle would have played out. And I think that was probably quite a canny move for them to get Brunanburh located in Wirral in his book! I haven't read the book or seen the film, but I understand in the book he mentions Wirral Archaeology because they gave him a Viking Age knife which Bernard misunderstood was actually from the battle site, but it was an item acquired from somewhere else and given to him as a gift.

I know one of the things when we first dealt with Wirral Borough Council was that they wanted to know if there was tourism potential in promoting the Battle of Brunanburh association: asking can we monetise this? I suppose that level of publicity does create that possibility. And I mean, you know, the other thing that was going through my mind is it's very easy for us to say, yes, we should be doing resource packs for school teachers, and promoting local awareness. Yes, we should be bringing stakeholders around the table, but all of us are busy actually doing day jobs. We don't get paid any extra and

receive very limited kudos from management for doing local engagement work. That is a problem because the other thing I do find, which is nice, is that the public see us as a resource. So I had an email today saying something like: ‘I’ve just read something about vikings and I would love to chat about it. Would you be available to talk to me about this...’. It’s a member of the public I have never encountered before. Likewise, I occasionally get asked to go to primary schools and I have done that a few times but you lose most of a day to travel and have an hour in the class with kids, and you’ve reached out to thirty children. It’s fun, it’s enjoyable, but it’s a lost day of work. There was no time off to do it and no brownie points from my employers. At the same time there are so many pressures to perform on other things, that there is almost a need for expectation management as to what we can do for people. But also, wouldn’t it be nice if that stuff was actually encouraged by our employers as part of our jobs? I don’t think the business model of the contemporary university allows for much recognition of these activities.

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