Major boost to the Ashmolean's bid for Viking



Anglo-Saxon coins, jewellery and ingots

The Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology in Oxfordshire is a step closer to acquiring the internationally important Watlington Viking Hoard thanks to an HLF grant of £1.1million.

Extolled as one of the most significant finds of Viking material in the last 20 years, the hoard sheds light on the alliance between Alfred the Great's Wessex and Ceolwulf II's Mercia, the last two Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.

It was discovered near Watlington last year by metal detectorist James Mather, and declared treasure by the coroner for Oxfordshire in February, who valued it at £1.35m.

With help from National Lottery players, museum patrons and private individuals, the museum has raised 80% of the required funding and is appealing to the public to help raise the remainder before the end of January 2017.

An internationally important find

The Watlington Hoard comprises of jewellery, ingots (bars of silver) and about 200 Anglo-Saxon coins, which can be dated to an exceptionally narrow time period of 879-80.

The find is so significant because it contains so many ‘Two Emperors’ pennies, depicting Alfred (r.871-99) and Ceolwulf (r.874-879) side-by-side. This indicates a close alliance between the two, contradicting other historical sources. Experts at the Ashmolean hope the hoard will shed light on how the kingdom of Mercia came to be absorbed into England, as well whether Alfred played a role in his rival’s demise.

The hoard was buried close to an ancient track-way known as Icknield Street around the time of the Battle of Edington. It’s possible that it was buried in the wake of this violence, perhaps for safekeeping by a Viking who never returned.

[quote=Stuart McLeod, Head of HLF South East]“We’re delighted that, with money raised by National Lottery players, we can support the Ashmolean in acquiring the hugely important Watlington Hoard."[/quote]

Plans for the future

If acquired by the Ashmolean, the Watlington Hoard would go on permanent display in the museum’s England 400-1600 Gallery alongside the famous Alfred Jewel.

Dr Xa Sturgis, Director of the Ashmolean, said: "The Watlington Hoard has a natural home here at the Ashmolean and thanks to the generosity of HLF, the friends and patrons of the museum and private individuals, we now have the rare chance to acquire it – for the local community where it was discovered and for all our visitors from across the world. If we don’t succeed it is likely that the hoard will be broken up into individual lots and sold at auction to private collectors.”

The museum has a detailed plan to engage local audiences, families and schools, as well as to display the hoard in national touring exhibitions.

Stuart McLeod, Head of HLF South East, said: “We’re delighted that, with money raised by National Lottery players, we can support the Ashmolean in acquiring the hugely important Watlington Hoard, making this locally-discovered treasure available to the public. The hoard sheds new light on a momentous period of English history and the Ashmolean will give it a fitting home, allowing its full significance to be studied and explored.”

To donate to the museum, take a look at the Ashmolean website.