

GOLD AND SILVER ÓR AGUS AIRGEAD IN ANCIENT IRELAND

Airgead Buí, Airgead Geal & Airgead Rua
(Gold Money, Silver Money & Copper Money)

Compiled from conversations between
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Introduction

This document summarises extensive research discussions exploring the rich history of gold and silver as money and stores of value in ancient Ireland.

These conversations challenged conventional academic narratives, particularly the oversimplified “cattle as currency” model, and revealed a far more sophisticated system of barter combined with metal-based exchange that has deep roots in Irish and Celtic culture.

The Irish language itself preserves this monetary heritage through terms like *airgead buí* (gold money), *airgead geal* (silver money), and *airgead rua* (copper money) – terms that maintain the connection between the metals themselves and their function as currency.

1. Challenging the “Cattle as Primary Currency” Myth

A central theme of our discussions was the critical re-evaluation of the conventional narrative that cattle served as the primary currency in ancient Ireland. Mark argued compellingly that this view is both economically misguided and exaggerated.

The Practical Problem

Using cows as a means of exchange makes very little monetary or economic sense. Cattle are indivisible, perishable (they die, age, and require feeding), difficult to transport, and wholly impractical for daily transactions. How would one purchase a milk, butter or a loaf of bread with a cow?

The More Accurate View

Cattle more likely served as a **unit of account** (like modern “dollars” as an abstract measure) and as a **store of value** and status symbol. The actual **medium of exchange** for daily transactions were initially crude nuggets hammered into metallic tokens by smiths - creating *píosa airgid* (silver/metal crude metallic pieces). Ring money or fáinne geal & buí, fasteners (dúntóirí), brooches, that were far more practical for commerce.

This parallels other ancient economies where theoretical value units (like cattle) existed alongside practical exchange media (metals). Gold was not used in everyday transactions among the people and tended to be owned by Royalty, Brehons, Druids etc

2. Archaeological Evidence

Bronze Age Ireland (c. 2500-600 BCE)

The archaeological record reveals that Bronze Age Ireland possessed extraordinary wealth in gold, silver and copper. Major gold discoveries include:

The Mooghaun North Hoard (1854): Over 150 gold objects weighing more than 5 kg (11 lbs), including bracelets, collars, and neck-rings.

The Tullydonnell Hoard (2018): Four solid gold penannular rings weighing 4 kg total, interpreted as bullion rather than finished artefacts.

Ring Money Evidence

Bronze rings have been found in large hoards with remarkably regular weight, shape, and appearance, suggesting they were multiples of a standard unit and functioned as proto-currency. Celtic bronze ring money dates from approximately 800-50 BC and was traded among Celtic tribes from the Danube to Ireland.

Standardised Bronze Objects

A decade-long study by archaeologists Lorenz Rahmstorf and Nicola Ialongo from Göttingen analysed over 5,000 bronze objects (rods, rings, and axe blades) and found they were deliberately mass-produced to be interchangeable using the Weber fraction principle – objects within certain weight ranges would feel identical when held, even without precise measuring technology. This suggests Bronze Age merchants operated standardised weight systems across vast distances.

3. Viking Age Evidence (9th-11th centuries CE)

The Viking Age provides extraordinarily rich archaeological evidence for Ireland's participation in sophisticated metal-based monetary systems.

The Bullion Economy

Vikings operated a **bullion economy** where only the weight of precious metal mattered, unlike the late Greek Empire, Roman Empire and medieval kingdoms which frequently had gold standards and economies with minted coins marked by rulers insignia, coat of arms and heads. Silver was melted into ring-style bracelets known as *arm-ring silver* for transport and wealth display. According to Icelandic sagas, Scandinavian rulers rewarded loyalty with silver arm rings on which warriors took oaths.

Hacksilver

Hacksilver consists of fragments of cut and bent silver items used as currency by weight. Viking silver was heavily nicked with small cuts as it passed hands to check for purity – a common practice in the metal-weight economy.

Irish Archaeological Sites

At the Woodstown Viking settlement excavation, hacksilver was found alongside smithing materials and tools, providing evidence of permanent settlement with manufacturing capabilities. Ireland has yielded 107 hoards and over 150 single finds from the Viking Age – significantly more than Scotland.

Weight Standards

Standardised units like the *eyrir* (ounce) and *mörk* (mark) facilitated trade across Scandinavia. Folding balance scales and spherical weights ensured consistency, with trading centres using *aurar*-calculation to guarantee value.

4. Brehon Law and Value Units

The oldest surviving Irish law tracts were first written in the seventh century and compiled in the eighth century. The *Senchas Már* (“great tradition”) is the best preserved collection, likely organised around 800 CE. These texts reveal sophisticated concepts of value and exchange.

The Sét

The *sét* generally equalled $\frac{1}{2}$ ounce of silver (depending on the law text) and was one of the two main units of value in medieval Ireland alongside the *cumal*.

The Cumal

The rough conversion system was: 1 Ounce Silver = 1 Milch Cow; 1 Cumal = 3 Milch Cows; 2 Sét = 1 Milch Cow. However, different law texts give varying values, which supports the view that cattle served as a unit of account while actual transactions used silver by weight.

An ounce of silver today has surged to over €90 per ounce and a milk cow can cost as much as €1,500 in Ireland today. Silver remains cheap compared to dairy cows, livestock and food, suggesting that silver may be undervalued.

Metal References in Legal Texts

The Dictionary of the Irish Language records *cumala beca dibside, di uingi go le[th] cach cumaile* (“small cumals of these, two ounces and a half each cumal”) and *cumala bana .i. di argat nó findruine* (“white cumals, i.e. of silver or white bronze”). This means that cumals could be paid in actual silver, not just cattle or slaves.

The Brehon laws specified that a husband-to-be shall pay a bride price of land, cattle, horses, **gold, or silver** to the father of the bride – explicitly listing precious metals as payment options.

5. Gold, Kingship, and Sovereignty

A profound theme emerged in our discussions: the inseparability of gold (*ór*) from legitimate kingship (*rí*) in Irish tradition.

Fír Flathemon – The King’s Truth

At the heart of Irish kingship was the concept of *Fír Flathemon* (King’s or Man’s Justice or Truth). The *rí*’s legitimacy rested on maintaining this “truth” which manifested through just judgements, prosperity of the land, and the distribution of wealth to supporters.

Gold as Physical Manifestation of Royal Power

Wealth was mentioned among the qualifications for the kingly office. But this wasn’t merely personal wealth – the king had to **display and distribute** it. Those extraordinary Bronze Age hoards – the Mooghaun gold, the Tullydonnell rings – were not random accumulations but royal treasuries, the physical manifestation of a *rí*’s power and the land’s prosperity under his rule.

An Niagh Nasc – Knights of the Golden Chain

Long before the advent of Christianity and European knights and kingdoms, Canon Bourke identified five separate military orders in Ireland, the first being *An Niagh Nasc* – “Knights of the Golden Chain.” The primary military order was defined by gold chains – the king’s elite warriors wore his gold as a sign of their bond to him.

The Sacred Marriage to Sovereignty

In Irish mythology, the king ritually “married” the land goddess (Sovereignty). The dowry of this sacred marriage was the fertility and wealth of the land – manifested as abundant harvests, cattle herds for dairy and meat, and gold and metals from the earth. When a *rí* could display gold collars or lunula, distribute gold rings and chains to his warriors, and pay his craftsmen in gold and silver, it **proved** the land recognised him as rightful king.

6. The “Emper-Ór” Insight

Our discussions explored fascinating linguistic connections between power and gold across cultures.

Roman Empire, Emper-Ór, Imperium and Gold

In ancient Rome, *imperium* was a form of authority that **explicitly included wealth** as part of its very definition. The scope of an Emperor or powerful person’s *imperium* could include public office, commerce, political influence, or wealth. A consul without *aes* (bronze money) had no *imperium*. As the Roman Empire expanded, Emperors and their commanders needed *argentum* (silver), then *aurum* (gold).

The Functional Unity

While standard etymology traces “emperor” through Latin *imperare* (to command) without direct connection to gold, the **functional** unity is complete. The scholarly separation of “command” and “gold” serves to mystify the material basis of power.

Mark’s observation: “Commander” = “Command-Or.” Whether or not this reflects etymological origin, it reveals a deeper truth about power – that Emperor’s command & power and having gold were never separate. The Roman general or *imperator* required *aurum and conquered lands to acquire gold, silver and metals and to get tributes paid in gold etc.*

Much of the ancient world shows what modern economics obscures: command and power were conferred by owning gold and land which was the ultimate form of money and wealth which could be used to command armies and buy allegiances, more land etc

The Irish *Rí* also ruled with *ór* but usually in a more benign way due to the moderating influence of Brehon Law and the advent of Celtic Christianity and Christ's teachings to love others as you would love yourself and that the Kingdom of God or Spirit is in All beings.

7. The Tree of Life Connection

These discussions have profound relevance to the Tree of Life gold coins being developed by Tara Coins.

Celtic Sacred Tree Symbolism

In Irish mythology, the sacred tree was seen as a doorway into the otherworld; the roots descend into the realm of the *sídhe* of the mound, while the branches reach to the celestial skies above.

The *Craeb Uisnig* (Tree of Uisneach) was one of the five sacred trees of Ireland.

The King and the Tree

The king's relationship with the sacred tree paralleled his relationship with gold:

Roots in earth represent connection to ancestral wealth, buried hoards, and the *síde*. The trunk embodies the king himself, channeling earth's bounty upward. Branches reaching heaven symbolise the distribution of wealth and displaying sovereignty to the divine realm.

When a king wore a gold lunula or distributed gold torcs, he was literally **embodying the sacred tree** – taking wealth from the earth (gold from the ground) and distributing it upward/outward to maintain cosmic and social order.

Modern Significance - Wisdom & Divinity

The Tree of Life silver & gold coins honour this ancient truth – that precious metals mediate between earth and heaven, the sun and the moon and sacred geometry and infinite time

This is how we manifest sovereignty, freedom and abundance, and that the wise individual should have *ór agus airgead* to demonstrate alignment with mother nature and lunar, solar, cosmic and universal order and cycles.

The Tree of Life coins or medals carry ancient wisdom and consciousness and are helping us to remember how evolved our Gaelic and Celtic ancestors were and who we are as Divine beings having this brief and beautiful human experience.

Having precious metals in the form of beautiful Tree of Life coins or medals is our

birthright and a way of asserting our independence from corrupt systems and self sufficient abundance.

Conclusion: Key Insights

Our research discussions reveal a far more sophisticated monetary history in ancient Ireland than conventional narratives suggest:

1. The “cattle as currency” narrative is oversimplified. Cattle served as a unit of account and store of value, while crude metal pieces, rods and rings were the practical medium of exchange.
2. Bronze Age Ireland participated in sophisticated weight-based metal exchange systems spanning vast distances.
3. The Viking Age brought Ireland fully into the silver bullion economy with hacksilver, arm-rings, and standardised weight systems.
4. Brehon Law texts explicitly allow payment in silver and gold, demonstrating that precious metals were recognised legal tender.
5. Gold was inseparable from legitimate kingship – the *rí* ruled with *ór*. A king without gold to distribute was a king that the land was not yielding abundance too.
6. The functional inseparability of power and gold – whether Roman *Emper=Or* or Irish *rí* – reveals truths about gold’s importance to command power that modern academia has not appreciated.
7. The Irish language itself preserves this heritage through *airgead buí*, *airgead geal*, and *airgead rua* – maintaining the ancient connection between the land, metals, money and cosmic order.

“May the ór flow and the truth shine bright!”

"Go raibh do theach lán de gháire, Go raibh do phócaí lán d'ór, Agus go raibh an t-ádh leat, A chroí Gaelach."

"May your home be filled with laughter, May your pockets be filled with gold, And may you have all the happiness, Your Irish heart can hold"

— *Sláinte mhaith*