

# Guldgubber – a Glimpse into the Vendel Period

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## Abstract

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Guldgubber are tiny gold sheet figures with embossed or engraved pictures of anthropomorphic figures. Guldgubber are found all over Scandinavia at so-called central places (e.g. Helgö, Uppåkra, Borg, Gudme and Sorte Muld). They have been found around post-holes in halls (if found in situ) and, judging by the repetition of an identical stamp motif, they represent mass production. The pictures of the guldgubber can be divided into five main categories: men, women, double figures, wraiths and animals. The conventional theories of temple money or of identifying individual Viking gods on younger Iron Age pictures is discarded here. Other probable theories presented are that the guldgubber were a kind of votive offerings to higher powers or entities. They may also have been used as documents in a legal context, symbolizing legal gestures in an oral tradition society. They may furthermore have been used for the benefit of the travelling or the dead.

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## Facts

Guldgubber are little gold-foil figures which are found in Denmark, Sweden and Norway. They are dated from AD 500 to 800 – the Vendel Period or Late Iron Age. The guldgubber show men, women and animals, which are stamped in or cut out of the gold sheet. They measure up to one centimetre in height and up to one centimetre in width. The thickness is up to 1 millimetre, when they are cut out and not stamped. They are made of a gold alloy consisting of gold with copper or silver. Occasional copies are made of bronze (two pieces so far, one with a loop intended to be used as pendant) or pure silver (one piece so far) (Ratke 2009 catalogue). Up to now (2008) about 3000 guldgubber have been found, not all fully preserved but quite a lot in fragmentary condition. The biggest collection was found on Bornholm at Sorte Muld

(Denmark) (Watt 2001, p. 201). The largest number in Sweden was unearthed in Uppåkra with about 120–150 guldgubber (Lamm 2004, pp. 61–62; Watt 1999, pp. 177–190). Other well-known find places are Slöinge, Ravlunda and Helgö in Sweden, Mære and Borg in Norway and Gudme/Lundeberg in Denmark (Fig. 1). As there is often more than one gubbe showing the same motif (sometimes up to 60 copies) it can be stated that guldgubber are mass products made with patrices. The find circumstances of the guldgubber connect them to central places where they are often connected to post-holes or other structural features. At central places they currently appear together with glassware, bracteates, deliberately bent spear heads and luxury goods of all sorts such as rings, beads and precious stones. They are found at so-called central places, where luxury goods were present and probably also the elite of the society. It is



Fig. 1. Distribution of guldgubber in Scandinavia (after Lamm 2004)

conceivable that these central places were the centre of politics and religion, possibly even the site of a kind of *thing* or jurisdiction.

## Categories

In this article a new categorization of the iconographic material of the guldgubber will be presented. The guldgubber can be divided into seven categories: men [A], women [B], double gubber [C], wraiths [D], animals [E], unidentified [F], and fragments [G]. Categories [F] and [G] were probably not intended by the original artists, but have to be included in a modern approach to the guldgubber as a whole.

Category [A] consists of gubber depicting only men. They always have rather short hair up to shoulder length; they very often wear a kaftan, which always leaves the feet and ankles visible. The attributes of men are the Franconian *Sturzbecher*, staff, ring, and a hitherto unidentified object, looking like a paddle or an ancient wine lifter.



Fig. 2. A man with a Franconian *Sturzbecher* [A-I-1]



Fig. 3. A man with a staff dressed in a kaftan [A-II-2]



Fig. 4. A man with a gesture, herewith one hand outstretched, the other is not visible [A-III-3]



Fig. 5. A man in mid action with a sword in his left hand, his other hand is raised. It is not evident whether the other hand was holding something as well. [A-IV-1]



Fig. 6. A man without any gestures; his feet are visible but not his arms. [A-V-5]

Category [B] is made up of women. They have all rather long hair, at least longer than shoulder length, but sometimes even floor length. They usually wear an Irish ribbon knot (with one exception, where the woman is wearing a hat). The dress is long and is sometimes combined with an apron and a cape. The feet are visible but very seldom the ankles. The attributes are: horn, fibula, ornamented cape, and necklace.



Fig. 7. A woman with a horn in front of her face. She is wearing a richly decorated cape and a complicated Irish ribbon knot. [B-I-1]



Fig. 8. A woman with a two-row bead necklace; her arms are not visible and she is not displaying any gestures. [B-II-2]

This category has two subcategories: [B-I] which comprises all women with a horn (Fig. 7) and [B-II] consisting of women without a horn but with necklace, fibula or cape (Fig. 8).

Category [C] consists of double gubber. Double gubber always show a pair of people facing each other. Normally a man and a woman make up this pair, but there are exceptions where the gender is obviously the same (but only 3–6 gubber against over 200 double gubber). There are no attributes, except for some as yet unidentified objects.



Fig. 9. A double gubber, on which he is standing on the left and she is holding her at her hip. [C-I-4]



Fig. 10. A double gubber, on which she is standing on the left and he is grasping her arm. [C-II-1]

The three subcategories are: [C-I], the man grasping the woman around the waist or hip (Fig. 9), [C-II], the woman grasping the man's wrist (Fig. 10), and [C-III], the pair holding each other (Fig. 11). The guldgubber with the same gender belong to [C-IV] (see Fig. 12).



Fig. 11. A double gubber, on which he is standing on the left and she on the right; they are both holding each other. [C-III-1]



Fig. 12. A double gubber, on which both have the same gender as indicated by the dress [C-IV-1] (source: Lamm 2004)

The next category [D] is called wraiths. Formerly some guldgubber of this group were called *dancers* (Watt 1992, pp. 213–215), but a closer look at the details of this group makes another explanation more plausible. They have big eyes and seldom any facial distinctions. They are always naked yet nevertheless have no gender specifications. They have exaggerated hands. Attributes of the wraiths are: a staff and in the case of one imprint a necklace. Sometimes a gold collar made of a piece of gold was wrapped around the guldgubbe after stamping.



Fig. 13. A wraith with its legs and arms pointing downward. Its palms are facing the observer, its feet point to its right side. [D-I-1]



Fig. 14. A wraith holding its hand on its chest. It is wearing a necklace made of beads. [D-II-1]



Fig. 15. A wraith grasping its right arm with its left hand. [D-III-1]

There are seven divisions of the category [D]. In the first [D-I] all wraiths have their arms and legs with feet pointing downward (Fig. 13). In subcategory [D-II] they touch their breast (Fig. 14). Subcategory [D-III] contains guldgubber where the anthropomorphic being is folding its arms (Fig. 15). Subcategory [D-IV] shows guldgubber where the being is holding its hand up to its mouth (Fig. 16). In category [D-V] all of the beings shown have no or cut arms (Fig. 17). Subcategory [D-VI] consists of guldgubber where the being has raised arms (Fig. 18). The last category [D-VII] shows staff bearing wraiths (Fig. 19).



Fig. 16. A wraith holding its hand in front of his mouth. [D-IV-2]



Fig. 17. A cut-out guldgubbe showing a rather stylized arm and hand. [D-V-1]



Fig. 18. A guldgubbe displaying a wraith with a big head and its arms pointing upwards. [D-VI-1]



Fig. 19. A wraith bearing a staff. [D-VII-1]



Fig. 22. A guldgubbe displaying a man with a beard and a woman-like dress [F-I-1]



Fig. 23. A guldgubbe with visible outlines but enigmatic imprint [F-II-3]

Category [E] is made up of animals and has no subcategories. There are at present 12 imprints of animals (all found in Sorte Muld so far) and not all of them can be categorized. There are bears, pigs and probably a kind of deer (Fig. 20-21).



Fig. 20.  
An animal, probably a kind of red deer. [E-1]



Fig. 21. An animal, probably a pig. [E-3]



Fig. 24. An almost completely faded guldgubbe [F-III-1]



Fig. 25. A formerly folded guldgubbe [F-IV-1]

Category [F] describes all unidentified guldgubbe. It is conceivable that they belonged to one of the categories above when they were made, but some of them are not readable at all. There are four subcategories: [F-I] the third and fourth gender (Fig. 22), [F-II] guldgubber with visible outlines but enigmatic imprint (Fig. 23), [F-III] almost completely faded imprints (Fig. 24), and [F-IV] formerly folded guldgubber (Fig. 25).

Category [G] unites all fragments (Fig. 26) and therefore combines categories and sub-categories of the other six categories.



Fig. 26. Fragments of one or more guldgubber [G-137]

## Interpretation

Some scholars have made an attempt to interpret the guldgubber and their function. The common interpretation is that they were a kind of temple money (Watt 1999) for a named god, e.g. Odin or Freyr (Hauck 1993). Hauck identifies especially the men with the *Sturzbecher* with the god Freyr, as the beaker which the man is holding contains his folded ship *Skidbladnir*, which is obvious from the ends sticking out of the vessel.

The double gubber were first seen by Gro Steinsland as the couple Gerdr and Freyr, as is stated in the *Skírnismál*. But those two are never mentioned as a loving couple after that and the marriage related in the *Skírnismál* is not one to look forward to, as it was forced. However, it is rather difficult to identify individual gods by taking hints from another period: the Viking Age.

The first interpretation, which starts with the attributes and the displayed scene on the guldgubber rather than identifying them as Viking Age gods, gives only an idea for some

guldgubber but not for the whole corpus (Simek 2001; Simek 2002). R. Simek tries to explain the attributes seen on the guldgubber and states that the “paddle” on the gubber with a man and the *Sturzbecher*, resembles an ancient wine lifter. He was the first to put forward the idea of a law context for the double gubber and tried to prove it with the *Heidelberger Sachsenspiegel* and the theory of a legal *mund* marriage.

In this article I shall refrain from naming gods and will present three new hypotheses of the symbols and function of the guldgubber. Two of the three presented theories use only the pictures of the guldgubber and archaeological information to arrive at the usage or function of the guldgubber, while the third establishes an iconographical relation to other sources.

### *Guldgubber were votive offerings to higher powers*

The first theory interprets the guldgubber as votive offerings to higher powers or entities. The word entity is used on purpose as the author does not want to relocate Viking Age gods into the Vendel Period. The guldgubber could have been used to express a certain wish to the entity or entities during a wish, prayer, ritual or ceremony. If one wants to identify the wishes, one has to decode the pictorial world of the guldgubber first in order to understand the whole ritual. What do the individual pictures with their attributes and symbols mean?

An attempt to decode the pictures will be given in an example of a staff-bearing man (Fig. 27). A staff-bearing man could stand for a wise man, as elderly people tend to have a staff and are generally considered to be wiser than younger ones. But the staff could also indicate a judge or some other person personifying the law. The staff is still used in legal context some hundred years later, and at least in German sayings the staff is still used as a reference to law and judgment. The third possibility is that of a wizard, magician, druid

or shaman, seeing the staff as a magic wand (Price 2002). So a wish made with this gubbe could mean a wish for a wise judgement, wise or good guidance or advice, and probably the wish for help (magical or not). A possible function and symbolic meaning can be found for every category or subcategory of the guldgubber.



Fig. 27. A staff-bearing man with a beard. He could probably symbolize a wise man or a shaman. [A-II-6]

*Guldgubber were used as documents in legal context*

The next theory uses medieval German law texts for comparison. It has been stated by the author that there is continuity in pictures

from the Vendel Period to the end of the 11th century (Ratke 2009). After that time the pictures tend to be of Christian painting style. The medieval law text is the pictorial law text *Heidelberger Sachsenspiegel* (cpg 164) (Koschorreck 1976). The advantage of that text is that the law is described in words and pictures, which makes it quite easy to understand and find the right gesture for the law explained. The guldgubber and the pictures of the law text could be compared directly, and parallels with the imagery of the gubber can be found that way. Almost every guldgubber can be placed into a legal context, the majority quite probably in a context of inheritance.

An example of a law context can be given here. The context of inheritance is chosen, as this was and is often a question of debate amongst the heirs and has to be regulated somehow. The rune stones of the Viking Age state that quite clearly for the following era, and right down to the present day inheritance needs regulation. In Fig. 28 one can see a picture from the *Heidelberger Sachsenspiegel* (cpg 164). The man in front of the house is mortally injured and is being transported into the house in order to heal him. Unfortunately he dies in the house. He is showing two gestures of incapability. The first one because he is injured and cannot move, the other one, with his hands parallel to his body, because he is

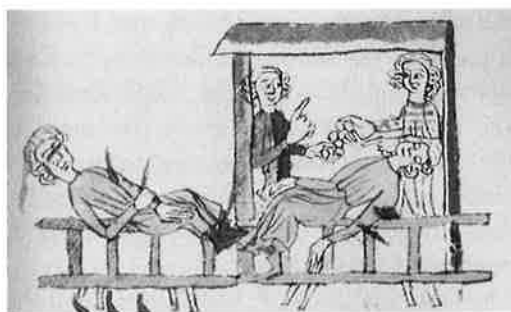


Fig. 28. A picture from the *Heidelberger Sachsenspiegel* (cpg 164) showing to the left a mortally injured man and on the right the same man dead.



dead. If one turns the wraiths of subcategory [D-I] (Fig. 29) around, it is quite easy to see the stunning similarity. So this guldgubbe could be used to show that someone died and another person claimed his bequest. The law document (one or possibly a collection of guldgubber) could have been fixed to a post in a big hall for everybody to see. As the society of the Late Iron Age did not have any written documents, it would have been a way to preserve spoken judgements.



Fig. 29. A wraith [D-I-56] turned through 90° to show the similarity between the gubbe and the dead person on the picture of the *Sachsenspiegel*.

Guldgubber were used in memory of the dead or travellers

This theory is also based on archaeological evidence. The guldgubber were found around post-holes – if found in a building – and were probably placed on the post for display. They were made in a large quantity and therefore probably used or at least theoretically needed a lot. During the Viking Age many Scandinavian people travelled a great deal – for business and raids. Before that, however, small raids were already taking place, as monastery books document, and it is quite probable that a lot of people travelled then as well. It is also natural that people died during that era, possibly also on a journey. Another possibility of interpreting the guldgubber is that

they symbolize the memory of the dead or are in memory of travelling people, probably in combination with a good wish.

To give better insight into the idea of memory of the dead and travelling, a few examples will be given here:

A guldgubbe from subcategory [D-I] (Fig. 30) could be taken and placed on a post for display. The person on the guldgubbe could represent an ancestor who had died quite a while ago and therefore is depicted in a more ghostlike style. It might have been the day that person died or a special holiday on which all people remembered their ancestors or the people who had died. They placed the gubbe on the post and probably made a kind of wish



Fig. 30. A wraith [D-I-6] which could represent a dead person or an ancestor.

for their good in the otherworld (however the otherworld might have been in their belief – but the graves found make it likely that there was some kind of otherworld or afterlife).

A guldgubbe from subcategory [A-V] (Fig. 31) could be taken for a recently deceased man – husband, father, brother or son. The guldgubber from that subcategory depict men who make no gestures and do not interact with anyone. The memory of the dead person is more vivid than that of the ones who died several years ago. A gubbe from subcategory [B-II] (Fig. 32) could be used for the same reason, depicting only a woman – wife, mother, sister or daughter. They could both be placed on the post on the same occasion as mentioned above or during a feast or burial ceremony.



Fig. 31. A man without gestures [A-V-2] who could stand for a recently deceased man – husband, father, brother or son.



Fig. 32. A woman without gestures [B-II-7] who could stand for a recently deceased woman – wife, mother, sister or daughter.



Fig. 33. A man with a Franconian *Sturzbecher* [A-I-2], possibly symbolizing a wish for a prosperous journey.

Other guldgubber could be used in memory of travellers. A guldgubbe from subcategory [A-I] (Fig. 33), a man with the *Sturzbecher*, could symbolize a wish for a prosperous journey, as in medieval times drinking completed a contract (the *arrha* in German laws). Whether the journey was a journey to another country or to an otherworld has to be decided by the reader; both are likely.

Regardless of the theory chosen, the possible use of the guldgubber is the same. As they were found around post-holes, it is very likely that they were fixed with resin to the posts, so that they could be seen. They must have fallen off after a time, which probably did not matter or was even intended.

Whatever their real function was, the people of the Vendel Period, in their making of guldgubber, revealed a very clear artistic ability and a highly complex symbolic thinking with an ability to establish an interesting symbolic system which has not been solved yet.

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