

Rituals and Language of Power

Migration Period Bracteates and their Deposition as Grave Goods

AXEL HANSEN

Abstract

Migration Period bracteates have been found throughout Germanic Europe. While most were placed in so-called hoards, a great number were also deposited in graves. As grave goods, bracteates were generally deposited in ways suggesting a symbolic display of status, gender and identity both before and after death. However, these displays show several distinct geographical differences in how bracteates were deposited and with whom. Some show signs of wear while others seem to have been made specifically for a single ritual purpose. Most grave finds outside Scandinavia consists of female inhumations with bracteates presented in necklaces, while graves in Scandinavia present a greater contextual diversity. Such practices display bracteates as tokens of wealth and prestige, but with different ideas on how wealth and prestige should be displayed. Since the deposition itself was an act with symbolic value, bracteates were multifunctional tools for contemporary elites, used to express influence and ideas in this life and the next.

Introduction

The Migration Period, often dated to 400 – 550 A.D., was a turbulent period in Europe. The great migrations and their aftermath formed new political landscapes and economies, as well as new ideas. Craftsmanship reached new heights, and one of its products were the bracteates. Bracteates have been known and studied for over a century. Their beautiful craftsmanship and complex design have attracted numismatics, art historians and archaeologists, who have presented and debated numerous ideas concerning

origin and meaning. Many believe that the little stamped imprints show scenes from Germanic myths, particularly Odin/Woden in his role as a shaman or healer (Gaimster 1998, 36 ff.). This hypothesis is partly based on similar objects made and worn in contemporary Byzantium, where medallions depicting the divine emperor were used as protective charms (Maguire 1997, 1041 ff.). However, the Germanic bracteates were likely assigned social meanings that differed from their Roman counterparts – not least

concerning their roles as social and cultural identity markers.

While most of the bracteate research has been focused on design, archaeologists have of late begun to study the find contexts, and their respective implications. Aside from single finds, they are found either as grave goods or part of treasure hoards. These two means of deposition follow an interesting geographical pattern. Bracteates found in southern Scandinavia (believed to be the heartland of bracteate production) almost exclusively belong to hoards. Specimens outside this core area, in England, Gotland and on the continent, have in most cases been interpreted as grave goods (Fig. 2). The grave finds seem in turn to have conformed to various local traditions regarding how the bracteates were placed, where in the grave, and with whom. As highlighted by fig. 2, these various traditions can roughly be narrowed down to five separate geographical areas: Norway, Anglo-Saxon Britain, the North-central Germanic area (including Saxony and Thuringia), the Roman province of Pannonia and the Baltic island of Gotland.

The contextual situation of bracteates raises some interesting questions. The majority of them were manufactured, worn and deposited over a relative short period of time. Most have been dated to the 5th and 6th centuries (Wicker 2008; Pesch 2011). Despite a great variety in design, their size and shape are almost universal. It is interesting that objects as homogeneous as bracteates would be deposited so differently, showing that they were exchanged and worn in a complex web of tradition, ritual and belief. In this article I will present a contextual overview of bracteates as grave goods, the manner of rituals that resulted in these contexts and what they indicate.



Fig. 1. Type C bracteate found in Hungary (Behr 2007, fig. 7A, from Hauck *et al.* 1989).

Bracteate distribution and artistic origin

A Migration Period bracteate (from the Latin *bractea* meaning “metal sheet”) is a thin disc with a central motif added with a stamp. While some bracteates only show a central motif (see Fig. 1), most are surrounded with a border of geometrical patterns and a decorated outer rim. In both cases the motif is always small, only a few centimetres. The board can range from a millimetre to being broader than the central image. Bracteates were also equipped with a loop, making it a coin-like pendant. They are almost always made of gold.

To date, approximately 1.000 bracteates dated to the Migration Period have been found. Roughly 75% of all finds have been made in a core area consisting of Denmark, southern Sweden and Norway. The remaining finds are spread over a large periphery spanning the North Sea and Baltic Sea areas,

inland Germany and Poland all the way to Austria and Hungary. The geographical distribution, combined with the dating of the finds, corresponds with the movements of several North and West Germanic groups during the Migration Period. Several of these, particularly the Jutes in Kent (Behr 2000) and the Lombards in Central Europe, have been put in direct relationship to bracteates. However, as ethnicity is a precarious term to connect with material culture, bracteates will primarily be presented as markers of identity within a framework of culturally similar societies where norms and the meaning of certain objects seem to have differed little from one another. It should be noted that bracteates found in the peripheral areas often postdate any Germanic migrations. It seems they were incorporated into an already settled society (Wicker 2008). This indicates a rather complex scenario of production and distribution of bracteates, as well as their social meaning, both in the living society and as goods for the dead.

Material culture does not originate from nothing. Although bracteates are considered a primarily Scandinavian (and overall exclusively Germanic) product, the source of inspiration originated from the Roman side of the *limes*. By the time Western Rome was being dismantled by various Germanic groups, Roman culture had had a profound impact on those very same people for centuries. One such impact was the influx of coinage. Roman coins minted in the 3rd century and onwards have been found in large numbers north of the Danube. Many of these seem to have been remade into pendants, with holes or loops added. Being displayed as jewellery instead of exchanged as currency means that the objects were ascribed entirely new social meanings among the Germans, although both functioned as symbols of wealth, in their own way. It is likely that Roman coins and medallions functioned as status objects among

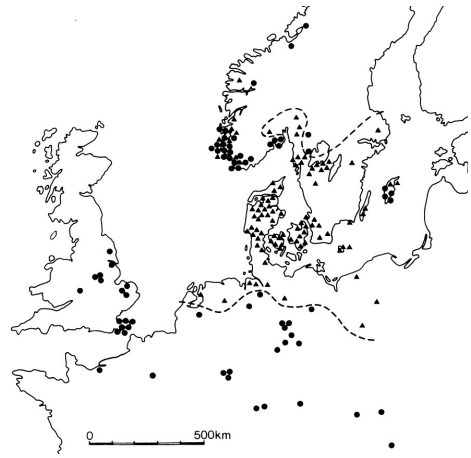


Fig. 2. Migration Period bracteate finds in hoards (▲) and graves (●) (Axboe 2007, fig. 86, after Gaimster 1992).

Germanic elites (Bursche 2001; Ploumis 2001, 67). A continuation of the tradition, or perhaps a response to it, are locally made imitations of Roman coin-pendants. These are considered the artistic precursors to bracteates. Like the latter, imitations are also found predominantly in Scandinavia, with a clear geographical distinction between grave and hoard finds. The former is typical of Norway and Gotland (Gaimster 2001, fig. 2; Ekengren 2009).

Looped Roman coins, medallions and imitations of them are linked to the connection between Rome and Germania. While bracteates were an artistic continuation of Germanic-made coin imitations they were produced and designed in a context away from the Roman world. The production of them has been dated to approx. 400 – 550 A.D., and although they seem to have been produced in a number of separate areas, pattern designs suggest western Denmark as a primary manufacturing source (Pesch 2011). This places them in a context separate from the Roman medallions, with different symbolic and practical meaning. They were not imported status symbols but made by and for people sharing the same cultural

framework. Nor were they direct imitations of Roman objects (although early specimens show a clear inspiration of Roman art, particularly focused on the Roman emperor as a god-like figure; Axboe 1991, 188 ff.). Bracteates were objects with a unique social value. The artisan, the owner and the observer could understand its symbolic meaning. A large number of bracteates show signs of wear and damage, proving them to have been 'active' objects in society, regularly worn and displayed (Wicker 2005).

If we accept that everyone physically involved with bracteates regarded them through the same cultural lens, patterns in their geographical distribution can give us an idea of their role in society. Behr (2007) suggests that these patterns of distribution mirror the movement of artists, owners or marriage alliances. Royal Germanic families in the Migration Period often made alliances spanning vast distances, and those sealed in marriage saw women travelling equal distances to their new home. When they did, they brought wealth and jewellery with them. The idea that bracteates were property of foreign brides is widely accepted, but it complicates the matter of bracteate production. Pesch (2011, fig. 4, 382) suggests an alternative idea. Several bracteates in the periphery areas (Fig. 2) seem to have been made locally instead of being imported. Pesch argues that the patterns of distribution show the production results by a close-knit group of artisans all adhering to a standardized design pattern (referred to as *formularfamilien*, "design families", see fig. 4b-c). This would indicate that bracteates were produced locally. Scandinavian bracteates set the standard for production elsewhere, perhaps displaying an idea of traditional – or indeed mythical – origin for those that wore them.

This might explain why such valuable objects were placed in hoards and graves, separating (at least visually) any ties to the

living community. As mentioned, signs of wear is common on bracteates. Grave finds include specimens ranging from seemingly brand new to pieces that might have been worn for generations. Placing newly made status objects in a grave suggests that the bracteate could have been made specifically for the occasion, but it could also have reflected the social influence of the deceased. Specimens that had circulated between more than one owner is a different matter. Placing them in a grave would have been an act of ritually 'ending' its life, rather than passing it on to a new owner. Objects can over time acquire 'biographies' through human experiences. They become objects with agency of their own (Gosden & Marshall 1999). Concerning Migration Period bracteates, this might have applied to younger bracteates as well in that they were understood to present the same symbolic agency despite a shorter time spent with the living. This transformation from 'living' to 'dead' objects might have several explanations. It is important to remember that bracteates were worn and deposited during a relatively short period of time – but also across a very large area. The different domains in this area reveals how bracteates were handled, and what significance they played as grave goods.

Bracteate grave contexts

Norway

Southwest Norway is the only Scandinavian area where bracteates are common as grave goods. As opposed to Sweden and Denmark, where bracteates are almost exclusively hoard finds, Norwegian bracteates were regularly placed in both, often in close proximity to one other. This eliminates the idea of separate local tradition (unless a radical change over time occurred, of which there is no evidence). Indeed, regarding the deposition of bracteates

Norway seem to lack any sort of coherence at all. The graves themselves show remarkable diversity. Bracteates have been found in urn graves, stone cists, cairns, mounds and on regular grave fields, in cremations and inhumations (Hauck *et al.* 1989).

The manner of deposition is also quite differentiated. Few if any of the human remains have been gendered through osteology, so the male/female ratio is unfortunately unknown. However, the grave goods yet again indicates a marked difference: bracteates in Norway have been found in 25 weapon graves, 10 with relief brooches and 10 with textile-making tools, such as spindle whorls (Hauck *et al.* 1989; Wiker 2001, 55). Weapons are rarely found in the same grave contexts as exquisite jewellery or tools for spinning and weaving, traditionally indicating objects connected with ideas of male and female. If these Norwegian grave goods do express gender status, then it would mean that bracteates did not. At least as long as they were buried with its wearer, and not placed by a mourner. Two cases (IK 86 & 113) stand out even further, since they were separated from the grave altogether. IK 86 was placed on top of the primary structure, while 113 was found beside it. This indicates not just a physical separation, but also a ritual one, perhaps marking a 'sealing' of the tomb during the final stages of the ceremony.

The number of Norwegian bracteate graves stand in stark contrast to its Scandinavian neighbours. It should however be noted that Denmark has remarkably few graves preserved from the Migration Period. Theoretically the tradition of using bracteates as grave goods could have been shared contemporaneously in Sweden and Denmark, but lack of archaeological evidence restrains further research. It should be noted, however, that the large number of hoard depositions in that same area may represent a parallel burial tradition (albeit without a body). Many of the Migration Period hoards in Southern Sweden

and Denmark featuring bracteates often also contain beads, brooches and other types of jewellery, presenting interesting similarities with female burials elsewhere in Northern Europe. Regardless, Western Norway presents a distinguished heterogeneous tradition in how bracteates were used in grave ritual.

Gotland

Strategically situated in the Baltic Sea, Gotland has a long history as a centre of commerce and exchange. The Migration Period was no exception: contemporary finds on the island are lavish, including the hoards and graves featuring bracteates. Like Norway, Gotlandic bracteate graves show an interesting diversity, including cremations, inhumations and graves with more than one individual (Hauck *et al.* 1989, IK 216, 286:1). One tradition stands out as unique: bracteates as Charon's Obols. Three specimens (IK 62:2, 286:1, 365:8), were found on or in close proximity to the head of the deceased, indicating they had been placed on or in the mouth. This tradition, thought to be inspired by a similar Greek practice, was rather common in the Germanic area (see Ekengren 2009), but bracteates are otherwise unknown as obols for the dead. It is possible that they were considered magical, at least in certain circumstances, and used as a way of sealing the tomb – or to prevent hauntings. Hinton (2005, 31 f.) calls such objects "appeasers", where an artefact is ascribed magical properties, such as to prevent a dead body from returning from beyond the grave. It should also be noted that IK 62:2 and 286:1 were weapon's graves, indicating that they belonged to men (Hauck *et al.* 1989; Wicker 2005, 52), a tradition that sets Gotland and Norway apart.

Another tradition unique to Gotland are 'cropped' bracteates, where boards and loops have been cut or sliced off. This would have made them useless as pendants, and stylistically similar to coins, albeit without

evidence of monetary value. Axboe (2007, 105, 108) suggests that they were specifically intended for deposition and burial, making them wholly ritual objects. Overall, a large number of deposited bracteates across Europe have been found with their loops removed. It is entirely possible that it was an intentional act of ‘incapacitating’ them by making sure they could not be worn. As buried wealth, they were separated from the realm of the living.

England

Bracteates in England present a more homogeneous tradition, with almost all finds made in grave field burials. These finds are mainly located close to the North Sea coast, with a distinct concentration in Kent; half of the British specimens have been found there. Many seem to have been produced locally (Chadwick Hawkes & Pollard 1981; Behr 2000). The English graves in question were inhumations, where the bracteate(s) were found in the neck or chest area, often with other pendants as well as glass beads, indicating they were part of necklaces. Based on osteological analysis and the manner of grave goods, almost all have been classified as belonging to females. One notable exception is IK 467 from Monkton, where a bracteate



Fig. 3. Reconstruction of bead necklaces with bracteates from Finglesham, Kent (Chadwick Hawkes & Pollard 1981, fig. 6).

had been placed near the hip – probably inside a belt pouch – of a male buried with sword, shield and whetstone (Hauck *et al.* 1989). Bracteates in weapon graves are otherwise typically Scandinavian, as mentioned above. Graves such as Monkton have been interpreted to represent a missing link between times when pendants like Roman medallions were closely associated to men and military prestige to the later bracteates which mostly seem to connect with influential women (Gaimster 2001, 144; Wicker 2010, 74).

English and continental bracteates may have been the result of local production rather than imports, but they nonetheless share a close connection with Scandinavian designs (Fig. 4a-c). This might indicate that local elites, especially among the Jutes in Kent, used bracteates and similar status objects to claim kinship and as connections to their ancestry as pagans originating from Scandinavia and Saxony. If the bracteates indeed depicted pagan gods such as Woden/Odin, a kinship to them could have been expressed as well (Chadwick Hawkes & Pollard 1981; Behr 2000).

English bracteates have overall been studied as objects connected with influential or ruling families trying to present an image of legitimacy. This is hardly surprising: the area comprising modern-day England was subject to rapid change in power balance and demographics during the Migration Period. As an expression of Germanic – particularly Scandinavian – art, the new rulers used artistic as well as military prestige to secure their influence. For elites originating from overseas, objects like bracteates could be used as an expression of wealth and status, but also for their symbolic connection to continental dynasties (Hinton 2005). Based on design patterns, English bracteates certainly seem to have been influenced by southern and western Scandinavian contemporaries (see fig. 4b).

Bracteates are commonly found in hoards in Southern Scandinavia and Northern

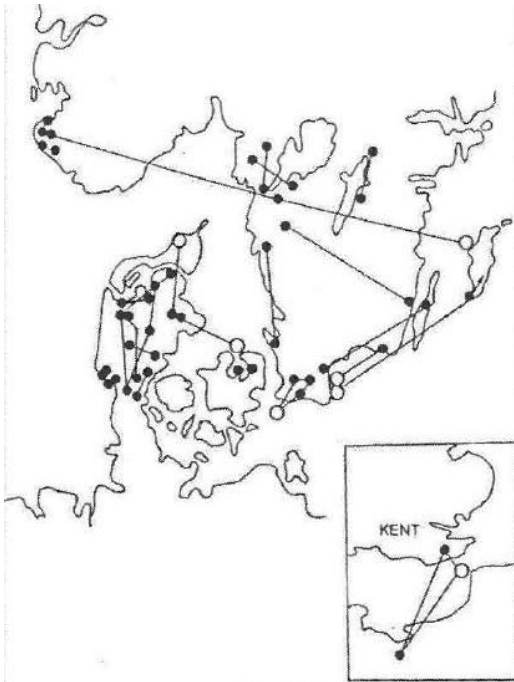


Fig. 4a. Distribution of links between bracteates and dies, not including links within Gotland and Funen. Open circles represent uncertain find places (Behr 2007, fig. 1, from Axboe 1991).



Fig. 4b. Distribution map of a “design family” of 32 stylistically related bracteates from 18 dies (Behr 2007, fig. 6B, from Pesch, 2001).

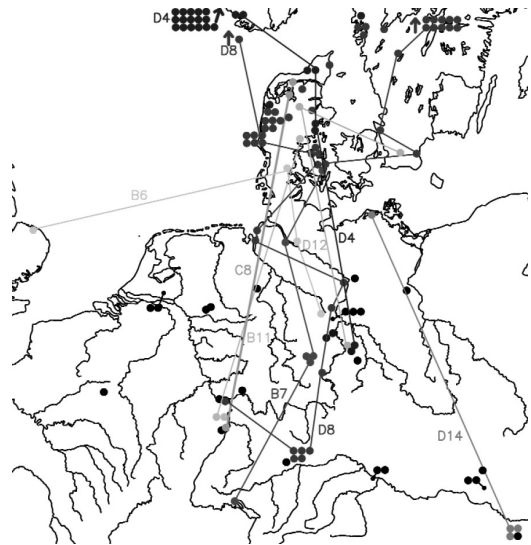


Fig. 4c. Links between Scandinavian and continental bracteate dies. Hues and figures represent “design families” (Pesch 2011, fig. 4).

Germany. This tradition is less prevalent in England, but one notable example is the Binham Hoard, featuring eight bracteates among other jewellery (Behr *et al.* 2014). Finds like Binham may reflect if not a direct link to Scandinavia, at least an inspiration to its tradition of placing bracteates in hoards. However, the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms were in contact with Christian Europe as well (swiftly adopting the religion), creating a unique socio-cultural context for bracteate production and function.

Continental finds

A possible origin to the English tradition of female inhumations can be observed on the continent, a large area stretching from Northern France to Western Hungary, with the bulk of finds in modern-day Germany. Apart from the coastal areas along the North Sea and the Baltic, female graves are overrepresented as bracteate find contexts (Pesch 2011, fig. 1). These finds also indicate a Scandinavian origin. Most continental bracteates are of the late style D, suggesting

a later production date and hence a later tradition than their northern counterparts. However, like in England, the production in question seems to have been local. They were not imports, but inspirations (Pesch 2011, 379, tab. I). Wicker (2008, 247) suggests that continental and insular specimens were made in Nordic styles but adapted to the various local conditions. Perhaps it was important to at least maintain the idea of a Scandinavian origin or affiliation.

This was likely the case with bracteate specimens encountered in the Czech Republic, Austria and Hungary, marking the southernmost area of finds to date. Despite its remote locations the bracteates found fit the continental/insular pattern: the specimens adorn bead necklaces, placed in female inhumations containing textile-making tools and jewellery (Hauck *et al.* 1989, IK 206, 484, 491, 559). This remote periphery has been connected to the Lombards, who occupied the Roman provinces of Noricum and Pannonia during the Migration Period. Lombards were supposedly pagan throughout the 6th century, meaning that the bracteates were worn and buried in a pre-Christian context. Bóna (1976, 66 f., 90 f.) refers to the contemporary tribal conflict between them and their (Christian) Gepid neighbours, and presents the idea that bracteates could have played a role as tribal markers, expressing a cultural and religious identity. Once again, pattern design reminiscent of Scandinavian specimens while the objects themselves were produced locally. Interestingly the same can be said about other grave goods, such as garb and jewellery. Wicker (2008, 247) suggests that the Lombards commissioned their own jewellers to purposefully imitate Nordic artwork in order to express a connection to Scandinavia. Real or imagined, the Lombards considered Scandinavia to be their ancestral home, and adjusting to Scandinavian fashion would have sent a strong visual message to the observer regarding identity and lineage.

Continental bracteates make up only a small number of the finds, but the majority of them indicate the same standardised practice as their English equivalents. Pesch (2011, 392) expresses it thus:

“The distribution of the gold bracteates [...] provides proof of a dense interlinking of relationships between the various Germanic tribes. This communication by means of images illuminates a network of central places and their elites. The continental women who owned the bracteates in the late phase of their production [...] were an active part of this cultural network.”

Ritual and identity

To summarize, bracteate production during the Migration Period was initially inspired by Roman objects and was mostly based in South Scandinavia. Within a few generations it had spread throughout the North Germanic area, from Anglo-Saxon Britain in the west to Lombard Pannonia in the southeast. Of almost 1.000 known specimens, 20% have been found in grave contexts. These are primarily from outside Scandinavia, where bracteates are known as typical hoard finds. Two exceptions are Gotland and southern Norway.

Scandinavian graves with bracteates are generally heterogeneous, with bracteates placed both on and away from the body, and in some cases outside the tomb. The tombs themselves are diverse regarding both physical form and the manner of burial. This is starkly contrasted by finds in England and on the continent, where bracteates are generally found as part of necklaces in female inhumation graves, placed around necks. Few graves have had bodies gendered anatomically. Most have been determined by the nature of the grave goods. However, biological sex and gender seem to have been closely linked. All graves with biologically determined females have been buried with ‘female’ grave goods,

such as spindle whorls, keys, jewellery etc. Anatomically gendered graves in England, Norway and Central Europe often match the grave goods in non-gendered graves, showing commonly accepted gender roles through dress and objects (Wicker 2005). Once again Gotland and southern Norway somewhat deviates from this norm, with a number of bracteates placed along weaponry and/or anatomically determined male graves (Axboe 2007: 104, Hauck *et al.* 1989, IK 3, 62.2, 85, 113, 216, 230, 231, 286.1, 380, 563). Despite the large variety of find contexts, all bracteates seem to have been objects heavily imbued with symbolism. The question is what they might symbolise, and whether it correlates with the roles they played previous to the deposition.

Ethnicity and culture

Bracteates have long been closely connected to Germanic, in particular Nordic, culture as material expressions of mythology and cultural community. Though small, a single specimen might have told an entire tale to an initiated observer. Wicker (2005) stresses the impact of contextual visibility: in living society, a casual view of a bracteate would have signified status (not only through the gold, but also as parts of lavish necklaces), while a closer examination would have revealed its design patterns, runic script etc., thus referring to the cultural identity of the owner.

As objects produced and circulating in a predominantly Germanic-speaking area, it might seem superfluous to wear objects expressing a specific ethnic or cultural identity of the wearer. At the same time, written sources make clear distinctions between political and tribal groups within Germanic-speaking Europe, while also featuring claims of specific (often Scandinavian) ancestry as a means to legitimizing power (See Behr 2000, Hedeager 2000). Such expressions, aided by material culture, may well have occurred in ways not

visualised in the archaeological context.

However, discerning ethnic identity in graves is precarious. Those conducting the ceremony had other options in expressing the identity of the deceased, such as gender or social rank. Ethnic identity is often stated in written records, but does not necessarily reflect the ideas of ethnicity among the broader population. Overall, archaeologists should be extremely cautious when attributing ethnicity and religious affiliation with archaeological burial finds (James 1989; Theuvs 2009). Despite the swift political and social changes during the Migration Period, the clear geographical distinction between the Scandinavian and continental bracteate graves do show patterns of local burial rituals. The cropped bracteates on Gotland is a good example. Migration Period Gotlanders would have spoken, acted and dressed much like contemporary Saxons and Lombards, but their ways of burying the dead and using bracteates as grave goods show a distinct cultural phenomenon.

Symbols of status

Local burial rituals also mirror changes in perception of how an object's influence was changed once placed with the dead. In the case of Gotland's cropped bracteates and brand new specimens placed in grave contexts there seem to have been little or no separation at all: these objects were made specifically for the dead and were thus conceived of as separate from the very beginning. Such prestigious and rare artefacts would likely have been reserved for the most influential in society.

Continental and insular grave finds are equally intriguing, albeit in a different ritual context. These bracteates follow clear, homogeneous patterns of deposition, with bracteates displayed on the dead in the same manner that they would have been during their wearers' lives. A factor that stands out among these similar contexts is the age of



Fig. 5. Grave 817 Straubing, Germany. The burial belonged to a girl of ca. six years of age. Besides a bracteate (IK 348) it contained a glass cup, key fragments, jewellery and more than 200 beads. This wealth indicates a high social rank despite her young age (Geisler 1998, CD image B817A).

the deceased: most were adults, with a few believed to have lived beyond the age of seventy, while several burials in Germany and England clearly belonged to children. Two examples are a grave at Finglesham, UK, belonging to a child of two (Chadwick Hawkes & Pollard 1981, 330 f.), and another at Straubing, Germany, with a girl of six (Geisler 1998, fig. 308-9, Vol. II. See fig. 5). There is no significant difference between the grave goods in these burials and those with adult individuals.

Presenting infants and elders with the same prestigious objects shows not only devotion to the dead, but also indicates that the wearers of these particular bracteates belonged to a defined social group displaying its privileges through wealth in life and death. The varying age of the bracteates themselves reinforces the idea: whether newly made or a treasured inheritance, they were intimately linked to an elite – perhaps the same international group who had commissioned the production of bracteates in the first place.

Women of power

The majority of graves with bracteates tend to display a certain aspect of this defined social elite: that of the influential female. If one accepts that bracteates were displayed in the same way on living and dead, it seems that they – with few exceptions – were worn by women. Wicker (2015, 4) argues that “*Bracteates held meanings for those who wore them, not just religious meaning but also the social meaning of the object as a carrier of high status and a marker of age and gender.*” Although they have been found in graves belonging to both men and children, the majority follow a clear pattern in that bracteates were often displayed along textile-making tools, keys and other jewellery. These have all been connected to skills and responsibilities an adult woman in Iron Age Europe was expected to handle. One should be careful to equate practical items such as spindle whorls and keys with more symbolic objects such as bracteates, but the frequency in which the different objects were placed in grave contexts is noteworthy.

As previously mentioned, researchers differ on the matter of bracteates as dowry objects. The Germanic nobilities perpetually intermarried, and in most cases the brides not only brought their own wealth into the marriage, but was also in control of it. This would explain the widespread distribution of bracteates across Scandinavia and the continent

(Arrhenius 1995). On the other hand, the idea of women as passive owners of family fortunes do not correlate with the production dates and localities of the bracteates, which often seem to have been inspired by foreign places rather than imported from them. If bracteates were the property of influential women, a more logical 'marriage-alliance scenario' would place women in charge of the production. Barbara Yorke (2003) points out that high-ranking Anglo-Saxon women were crucial agents in both secular and religious displays of power, while Wicker (2008) makes the same point of their contemporary Scandinavian counterparts, who often commissioned public works such as runic monuments. Both argue that bracteates could have been a marker not just for female influence, but also for origin. Once settled in her new household, the bride could have ordered the making of her own jewellery, its design based on the fashion of her (Scandinavian) homeland. Such valuable objects, symbolising both womanhood, status and origin, could have been so closely connected to the owner herself that she would eventually be buried with them. They could also have passed from mother to daughter, symbolising a continuation of female influence through the generations.

Changed symbolism through ritual

The scenarios above place bracteates in deposition rituals in which their ascribed symbolism changed little or not at all once deposited. However, it is important to remember that rituals are acts of transition and change, and that the meaning of an artefact can change profoundly once the ritual is over (Gosden & Marshall 1999).

Objects can acquire meaning through style and practical use, but also through the context in which it was placed. When deposited in hoards or graves, the biography of the bracteates would have been expanded, and in some cases rewritten. Previous ideas of gender, status or

cultural identity might have been altered to such a degree that it mirrored the physical and social transformation of the deceased: similar to the living version in form only.

When studying grave contexts one must be aware that the dead did not bury themselves. The ones organising and executing the burial rituals were free to present the dead with whatever objects and meanings they saw fit, while also being subject to the social demands of their time and place. When it comes to bracteate graves a running theme seems to have been prestige. This can be seen through several factors:

- *Altered form*: the cropped bracteates on Gotland are most notable, but bracteates across Europe have been found conscientiously altered. This include specimens having been folded and creased, and most commonly having their loop removed. These acts would have made bracteates useless as jewellery, ritually 'killing' them. This specific symbolism can be applied to both graves and hoards, as both acts sealed the context away from the living world. 'Killed' bracteates would in both cases have been permanently separated from the society that buried them.
- *Placement*: the most common pattern of bracteates' placement in graves is at the neck or chest area, indicating a deposition of displayed jewellery. Deviations from this pattern indicate alternative ritual practises. It is interesting to note that most graves with bracteates presented as "Charon's obols" have been interpreted as male, either through osteological analysis or by the nature of the grave goods, such as weaponry (Axboe 2007). A possible correlation between gender and placement on the head has not been closer examined, but deserves to be mentioned. Alternately, bracteates placed on the eyes or mouth of the deceased may

have been done so as part of a transition ritual, easing the dead into the afterlife – or preventing them from returning. The Norwegian specimens on top of the grave could have had a similar meaning.

- *Age*: old and worn bracteates would have been prestigious wealth, likely inherited, giving further gravity to their deposition. This is a regular occurrence among many artefact categories within Germanic grave contexts (Crawford 2004). However, newly made specimens placed in graves also had meaning of their own. They represented lavish spending on the dead, a luxury afforded only by the wealthy.
- *Grave type*: prestige can finally be expressed by the grave itself, such as its size, orientation or relation to graves nearby (James 1989). English and continental bracteate graves are often structurally similar, indicating shared ideas and values between widely-spread societies. Norwegian cases show a greater diversity, including mounds and cists which would have required a considerable work effort, presenting visual proof of influence.

Prestige and bracteate deposition were closely connected not only to the buried, but also (or perhaps more so) to the descendants. By performing burial and deposition rites, including presenting the dead with valuable and powerful items, they would have increased their own status as pious, wealthy and generous (Hinton 2005, 32). Gift-giving and prestige were common, important factors in Germanic societies, and there is every reason to believe that the elites who made and handled bracteates used them in these contexts (see Andrén 1991, Gaimster 1992). The same pattern of rituals can be seen in many other object categories in Germanic Europe. Tools, weapons, jewellery etc. were used to express status, rank, gender and other forms of identity (Hinton 2005, ch. 2 & 7).

This means that bracteates functioned within a framework of ritualised use within Germanic material culture, where prestige objects were common both among living and dead.

Conclusions

The Migration Period bracteate production was relatively short and intense, resulting in large numbers having been deposited across Europe. These depositions show distinct regional and local traditions, particularly in their role as grave goods. Finds in England and on the continent generally present bracteates as status symbols for influential women and girls. This is starkly contrasted among grave finds in Norway and on Gotland, where bracteates were heterogeneously manipulated, both in form and placement. The strict connection to gender seen elsewhere is also less distinct. Despite large geographical differences in deposition, the production of bracteates seems to have been highly centralised and carefully controlled by a small elite. These influential actors, likely the women among northern Europe's most powerful families, used bracteates as expressions of common values and ideas. These values may also have been expressed through local ritual traditions of deposition and burial. Although bracteates functioned as symbols of status, gender and cultural identity, the manner of expressing such identities varied from place to place, resulting in the diverse ways in which they were severed from the living society. The depositional rituals would also have altered their symbolic value: some were old heirlooms when deposited, others made specifically for burials, and many had been consciously damaged. Bracteates' role as grave goods may have mirrored their role in living society, but we must be cautious in our interpretations of how these roles were expressed and perceived across space, time and transition between

living and dead. Nevertheless, the elites wielding them successfully displayed their wealth and prestige not only through valuable objects such as bracteates, but also in the way they deposited said objects. As wealth for the dead, bracteates continued to express identity in this life and the next.

References

- Andrén, A. 1991. Guld och Makt – En Tolkning av de Skandinaviska Guldbrakteaternas Funktion. In Fabeck, C. & Ringtved, J. (eds.), *Samfundsorganisation og Regional Variation: Norden i Romersk Jernalder og Folkevandringstid*. Beretning fra 1. nordiske jernaldersymposium på Sandbjerg Slot 11–15 april 1989. Aarhus Arkæologisk Selskabs Skrifter XXVII. Aarhus.
- Arrhenius, B. 1995. Women and Gold: On the Role of Women in Society at the Time of the Great Migrations and their Relationship to the Production and Distribution of Ornaments. In Resi, H. G. (ed.), *Produksjon og Samfunn: Om Erverv, Spesialisering og Bosetning i Norden i 1. årtusen e.Kr.* Beretning fra 2. Nordiske Jernaldersymposium på Granavolden Gjøstgiveri 7. - 10. mai 1992. *Varia* 30, Universitetets Oldsaksamling, Oslo.
- Axboe, M. 1991. Guld og guder i folkevandringstiden. Brakteaterne som kilde til politisk/religiøse forhold. In Fabeck, C. & Ringtved, J. (eds.), *Samfundsorganisation og Regional Variation: Norden i romersk jernalder og folkevandringstid*. Beretning fra 1. nordiske jernaldersymposium på Sandbjerg Slot 11–15 april 1989. Aarhus Arkæologisk Selskabs Skrifter XXVII. Aarhus.
- . 2007. *Brakteatstudier*. Det Kongelige Nordiske Oldskriftselskab, Nordiske Fortidsminder 25. København.
- Behr, C. 2000. The origins of kingship in early medieval Kent. *Early Medieval Europe* 9 (1).
- . 2007. Using bracteates as evidence for long-distance contacts. In Harris, A. L. (ed.), *Incipient globalization?: long-distance contacts in the sixth century*. Reading Medieval Studies 32. Oxford.
- Behr, C. Pestell, T. & Hines, J. 2014. The Bracteate Hoard from Binham – An Early Anglo-Saxon Central Place? *Medieval Archaeology* 58.
- Bóna, I. 1976. *The Dawn of the Dark Ages: the Gepids and the Lombards in the Carpathian Basin*. Budapest.
- Bursche, A. 2001. Roman Gold Medallions as Symbols of Power of the Germanic Elite. In Magnus, B. (ed.), *Roman Gold and the Development of the Early Germanic Kingdoms: Aspects of Technical, Socio-Political, Socio-Economic, Artistic and Intellectual Development, AD. 1-550*. Symposium in Stockholm 14-16 November 1997. Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien. Stockholm.
- Chadwick Hawkes, S. & Pollard, M. 1981. The Gold Bracteates from Sixth-Century Anglo-Saxon Graves in Kent, in the light of a new find from Finglesham. *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 15.
- Crawford, S. 2004. Votive Deposition, Religion and the Anglo-Saxon Furnished Burial Ritual. *World Archaeology* 36 (1).
- Ekengren, F. 2009. *Ritualization – Hybridisation – Fragmentation: the Mutability of Roman Vessels in Germania Magna AD 1-400*. Acta Archaeologica Lundensia, Series in Prima 4^o, No. 28. Lund.
- Gaimster, M. 1992. Scandinavian gold bracteates in Britain: money and media in the Dark Age. *Medieval Archaeology* 36.
- . 1998. *Vendel Period bracteates on Gotland: On the significance of Germanic art*. Acta Archaeologica Lundensia, Series in 8^o, No. 27. Lund.
- . 2001. Gold bracteates and Necklaces: Political Ideals in the Sixth Century. In Magnus, B. (ed.), *Roman Gold and the Development of the Early Germanic Kingdoms: Aspects of Technical, Socio-Political, Socio-Economic, Artistic and Intellectual Development, AD. 1-550*. Symposium in Stockholm 14–16 November 1997. Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien. Stockholm.
- Geisler, H. & Hauck, K. 1987. Zwei Frauengräber von Straubing-Bajuwarenstraße mit Goldbrakteaten aus dem Norden. *Zur Ikonologie der Goldbrakteaten* XXXIV.
- Geisler, H. 1998. *Das frühbairische Gräberfeld Straubing-Bajuwarenstraße*. Vol. I-II. Katalog der archäologische Befund und Funde. Internationale Archäologie 30. Rahden/Westf.
- Gosden, C. & Marshall, Y. 1999. The Cultural Biography of Objects. *World Archaeology* 31 (2).

- Hauck, K. Axboe, M. Clavadetscher, U. Düwel, K. & von Padberg, L. 1989. *Die Goldbrakteaten der Völkerwanderungszeit*. Ikonographischer Katalog (IK 1-3 Text, 1-3 Tafeln). Münstersche Mittelalter-Schriften 24 1,1-3,2. München.
- Hedeager, L. 2000. Migration Period Europe: the formation of a political mentality. In Theuws, F. & Nelson, J. (eds.), *Rituals of Power: From Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages*. Leiden.
- Hinton, D. 2005. *Gold & Gilt, Pots & Pins: Possessions and People in Medieval Britain*. Oxford.
- James, E. 1989. Burial and Status in the Early Medieval West. *Transaction of the Royal Historical Society* 39.
- Maguire, H. 1997. Magic and Money in the Early Middle Ages. *Speculum* 72 (4).
- Pesch, A. 2001. Uppåkra im Licht der Formular-Familien der völkerwanderungszeitlichen Goldbrakteaten. In Hårdh, B. & Larsson, L. (eds.) *Central places in the Migration and Merovingian Periods*. Uppåkrastudier 6. Acta Archaeologica Lundensia, Series in 8^o, No. 39. Lund.
- . 2011. Gold Bracteates and Female Burials: Material Culture as a Medium of Elite Communication in the Migration Period. In Quast, D. (ed.), *Wiebliche eliten in der frühgeschichte: female elites in protohistoric Europe*. Verlag des Römisch-Germanischen Zentralmuseums Internationale Tagung vom 13. bis zum 14. Juni 2008 im RZGZM im Rahmen des Forschungsschwerpunktes "Eliten". Mainz.
- Ploumis, I. M. 2001. Gold in Political Propaganda within the Roman Empire. In Magnus, B. (ed.), *Roman Gold and the Development of the Early Germanic Kingdoms: Aspects of Technical, Socio-Political, Socio-Economic, Artistic and Intellectual Development, AD. 1-550*. Symposium in Stockholm 14-16 November 1997. Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien. Stockholm.
- Theuws, F. 2009. Grave goods, ethnicity and the rhetoric of burial rites in Late Antique Northern Gaul. In Derks, T. & Roymans, N. (eds.), *Ethnic constructs in Antiquity: the role of power and tradition*. Amsterdam.
- Wicker, N. 2005. Display of Scandinavian Migration Period Bracteates and Other Pendant Jewelry as a Reflection of Prestige and Identity. In Bork, R. Montgomery, S. Neuman de Vegvar, C. Shortell, E. & Walton, S (eds.), *De Re Metallica: The Uses of Metal in The Middle Ages*. AVISTA Studies in the History of Medieval Technology, Science and Art Vol. 4. Bodmin.
- . 2008. Scandinavian Migration Period Bracteates found outside the Nordic Area: Import or Imitation? In Biehl, P. F. & Rassamakin, Y. Ya. (eds.), *Import and imitation in archaeology*. Schriften des Zentrums für Archäologie und Kulturgeschichte des Schwarzmeerraumes 11. Langenweißbach.
- . 2010. Situating Scandinavian Migration Period Bracteates: From Typology and Iconography to Gender, Agency and Visual Culture. In Domasnes, L. H. Hjørungdal, T. Montón-Subías, S. Sánchez Romana, M. & Wicker, N. L. (eds.), *Situating gender in European archaeology*. Prime Rate Kft. Archaeolingua Alapítvány, H-1250, Úri u. 49. Budapest.
- . 2015. Bracteate inscriptions and context analysis in the light of alternatives to Hauck's iconographic interpretations. *Futhark: International journal of runic studies* 5.
- Wiker, G. 2001. Om konstruksjon av en ny menneskelig identitet i jernaldern. *Primitive Tider* Årgang 4.
- Yorke, B. 2003. The Adaption of the Anglo-Saxon Royal Courts to Christianity. In Carver, M. (ed.), *The Cross Goes North: Processes of Conversion in Northern Europe, AD 300-1300*. The University of York. York.

Axel Krogh Hansen,
Sunnanväg 6N 222 26 Lund, axel.hansen87@outlook.com