

Amulet Pendants and a Darkened Sun

On the Function of the Gold Bracteates and a Possible Motivation for the Large Gold Hoards

By *Morten Axboe*

In this paper, I will approach the problem of the function of the golden pendants from a Scandinavian point of view, concentrating on the gold bracteates, as the Roman medallions and their Germanic imitations are being treated elsewhere in this volume (Bursche, this vol.). I will, however, briefly discuss the relationship between medallion imitations and bracteates, and finally venture a guess as to why the gold and the bracteates seem to disappear so suddenly at the end of the Migration Period.

The practical function of the gold bracteates

As for the basic function of the bracteates, I suppose that nowadays everybody agrees that they were worn as pendants, as indicated by their loops. As early as 1803 the Danish numismatist Christian Ramus drew attention to these and concluded that for this reason the bracteates could not have been intended to be used as coins (Ramus 1803, pp. 142–148). This discussion was relevant at the time, as the bracteates till then had mostly been labelled as “nummi aurei” (gold coins), “nummi bracteati” (one-sided coins), “Göldene Blech-Pfennige” or “orbis aurei” (round golden discs; Mackeprang 1952, p. 9) and treated together with coins and medals. On the other hand, even in the inventory of the Danish king’s collection of gold medals from the 1690’s a bracteate was supposed to be a pagan amulet (Mackeprang 1952, p. 12). Ramus, who considered the bracteates to be utterly crude and primitive, was open to this possibility, as “our ancestors were given to multifarious superstitions, their minds being full of goblins, fairies and other evil spirits, contrived in long, dark, sleepless nights” (1803, p. 144). Christian Jürgensen Thomsen expressed himself less passionately, but agreed that the bracteates were worn as pendants and presumably had an amuletic function (1855, p. 270 f.). After Thomsen’s time, several finds of graves with bracteates placed at the neck or on the chest of the deceased have confirmed their use as pendants, and a general amuletic value has been accepted by most authors.

However, before we continue to the question of the more specific religious



Fig. 1. Loop of gold bracteate found near Tønder, southern Jutland, with two notches at each end. 4:1. Photo: the author.

and social functions of the bracteates, it might be worthwhile to consider some practical details of their use as pendants.

Some bracteates have been used again and again, as demonstrated by their loops which are heavily worn, especially at the top. Some loops may even show two notches from wear at each end (Fig. 1). This may have come from the bracteates being worn on a chain, where the links would tend to lie flat and thus wear at two points at a time. Unfortunately no such chains have been preserved—actually we have very few finds to illustrate the suspension of the bracteates. The medallion imitation from Hove in western Norway was found on a silver chain when the grave was emptied in 1831; the chain was badly corroded and was melted down by the finder (M cat. no. 11; IK 85). In the bracteate hoard from Sievern in north-western Germany fragments of a braided leather cord were preserved in one of the loops (Schröter & Gummel 1957, p. 113; A 325, Pl. XI; IK 157). In the Agerskov hoard from western Jutland, where part of the find was still embedded in a block of peat when it came to the National Museum, fragments of a string were preserved (Pl. II; M cat. no. 95; IK 32, 2, 406).



Fig. 2. Reconstruction of two-strand necklet with pendants and gold bracteates from Finglesham grave 203, Kent. After Hawkes & Pollard 1981.

In a block of turf from Agerskov, western Jutland, six gold bracteates, sixteen beads and pieces of string were found inside an area of 5 × 6 cm. At the opposite end of the turf block, at most 18 cm away, a small bit of string and the imprint of a large bead were seen. Outside the turf block, 2 C-bracteates, a fragment of a square-headed brooch and 16 more beads had been found (M cat. No. 95; IK 32, 2, 406).

Three red beads were found on the top of 3 C-bracteates, which were lying close together (Plan b). Between these bracteates and a D-bracteate 3 more red beads were found, a long one in the middle with a short one at each end, while a fourth bead lay along the same line, but outside the bracteate. Under the fourth bracteate was found a piece of string, ca. 10 cm long, with 3 small green beads, a large red bead and a mosaic bead. There was no bracteate on this string (Plan a).

Frayed string-ends were found at most loops and beads, but apart from the piece just mentioned the course of the strings could not be established. It is not recorded where in the block the two last D-bracteates were found.

In some graves necklaces with bracteates, beads and other pendants can be reconstructed, as in Finglesham grave 203 in Kent (Fig. 2; Hawkes and Pollard 1981, p. 333 ff.), where the bracteates are nicely separated by beads. But in other finds no beads are present, and if that reflects the way their multiple sets of bracteates were actually worn, these would slide together and partly cover

each other if they were hanging on a simple string. Of course beads may have been used as separators but just not deposited or preserved. However, in the Agerskov hoard just mentioned, where beads are present, they were apparently not placed between the bracteates (Pl. II). So perhaps we should also envisage other possibilities, like bracteates being separated by knots on a woollen string or hanging in separate loops from the string. Pendants hanging in separate wires from a string can, for instance, be seen on the Frankish “shirt of St. Balthild” from the seventh century (Vierck 1981 Abb. 11 and Taf. 7; Gaimster, this volume, Fig. 6). The ultimate solution was of course the long golden tubes which served as loops for a few extraordinary bracteates (Kongsvad Å-A: M Pl. 9: 2, IK 101; Stenholts Vang-C: M Pl. 9: 11, IK 179).

Spiritual and social functions

As for function in a broader sense, I have mentioned the amuletic aspect. This may already have been taken over from Roman medallions together with the portrait of the emperor by the medallion imitations, for in the Empire not only small idols of various gods but also coins and medallions with the portrait of the deified emperor were worn and used as amulets to avert “evil eyes”, etc. (Gladigow 1992, pp. 18 f., 24; see also Düwel 1988, pp. 92–101). It is, however, evident even with the medallion imitations that the Scandinavians did not merely borrow the emperor’s portrait. They changed it, put their own meaning into it, and used it for their own purposes.

This theme has been elaborated by Karl Hauck in numerous papers. His method is “contextual iconography” (‘Kontext-Ikonographie’), by which the interrelations between the elements of the bracteate picture are evaluated. Written and pictorial evidence from the contemporary late antique world, which produced the prototypes of many of the bracteate patterns and details, are also taken into account, together with later sources like the Eddic texts or medieval magical formulae (e.g. Hauck 1988). As a result the bracteates are interpreted as focussing on Odin as the Lord of Magic with powers of healing and of vanquishing Death.

I shall not go further into this, as it is most complicated and has been exhaustively published. But I will mention that in his most recent papers, which are still in press, Hauck has started to explore the coherency between the iconographic representation on the bracteates and their runic inscriptions (Hauck, 1998 *b, c*). He is also reconstructing the Gudme II hoard from Fyn as a composite collar, where the C-bracteates IK 392–393, depicting Odin using his healing powers, and the D-bracteates IK 455, 2, showing the Demon of Death defeated and helplessly coiled up, surround the large B-bracteate IK 51, 3, which presents the situation just before Balder’s death—the ultimate challenge to Odin’s magic powers. The woman on the small B-bracteate IK

391 is identified as Frigg, Balder's mother, who played an important part in the events (Hauck, 1998 *a, c*; Gaimster, this volume, Fig. 4). Though this interpretation may be hypothetical, it is nevertheless a valiant and valuable attempt at a holistic view of a closed and complete bracteate find, seeing it as a consciously composed and internally consistent iconographic ensemble.

Generally Hauck stresses the amuletic aspect of the bracteates. Odin is their dominant figure, but other gods may appear, like Tyr with his hand in the jaws of the Fenris wolf on Trollhättan-B (M Pl. 5: 22a; IK 190) or Balder as shown on Fakse-B with the mistletoe in his breast (M Pl. 6: 11; IK 51, 1). The latter motif especially seems to me specific enough to justify reference to the Eddic myths when discussing the gold bracteates. The existence of the principal Germanic gods in the Migration Period, and even earlier, is testified to by the Germanic names for the days of the week. They seem to have been coined at the latest in the fourth century, perhaps in the decades around A.D. 300, as deliberate Germanic interpretations of the Roman names with specific regard to the characteristics of the individual gods (Green 1995, p. 158 f.; Rausing 1995).

Taking Hauck's bracteate interpretations as my point of departure, I have myself tried to consider the focus on Odin in its contemporary social and political context. In a period when the Danish and possibly other kingdoms were somehow developing in Scandinavia, and where members of the élite were evidently demonstrating status by wearing and sacrificing gold jewellery like neckrings, armrings and bracteates, it seems obvious for them to choose the Lord of the Gods as their favourite deity. It fits well with the fact that several royal families later claimed Odin as their ancestor. This was a way of legitimizing their right to power (Axboe 1991, 1994, pp. 154 f., 1995, pp. 231 ff.).

On Gotland, some bracteates had a special function. They have been found in graves, but unlike other Gotlandic bracteates they consist only of the flan with the bracteate motif—or even just the central part of it—without any trace of ever having been supplied with a rim or a loop. I have interpreted them as Charon's obols, struck for the purpose (Lamm & Axboe 1989).

But of course the bracteates and their function can be interpreted in other ways. Anders Andréén takes his point of departure in the formulaic runic inscriptions *laðu*, *laukaR* and *alu*, which are rather common on bracteates, meaning 'invitation', 'leek' or 'onion' (*Allium* sp.) and 'ale'. He regards them as Germanic equivalents to the standard inscription on Roman coins: *Dom(inus) ... p(ius) ... f(elix)*, "dominus" being the lord with power to issue an invitation (*laðu*), "felix" denoting the concept 'fortunate', and *laukaR* being a herb supposed to promote felicity. Finally, "pius" indicated correct behaviour towards gods and men, and *alu* was both the drink and a name of feasts made to honour the gods and establish friendships and alliances. The

human busts or heads are interpreted as showing the kings, who held the feasts and gave away bracteates to ensure friendships and alliances, and the names occurring on some bracteates might be their names (Andrén 1991).

It is in a way an attractive idea to consider the bracteate makers as paraphrasing the Roman inscriptions, just like they used the imperial regalia for their own purposes. But the 'translations' seem somewhat far-fetched, and they ignore the fact that both *alu* and *laukaR* occur on other objects in other contexts, and that *Allium* had an acknowledged role not only in magic but also in practical medicine (Heizmann 1987, 1992).

Elmar Seebold too, prefers to see the bracteates as gifts from kings or chieftains to their retinue (1992, pp. 308 f., 1994, pp. 615 ff.), though in a more general context. The origin was the genuine Roman medallions, which, due to their scarcity, were imitated in Scandinavia, leading to the emergence of the bracteates. Their motifs are interpreted as idealized portraits of kings illustrating their special sacral powers—"This man understands the language of the birds and the omens from the sacred horses, he is a king" (Seebold 1992, p. 308)—and the runic inscriptions are supposed to enhance their function as gifts to ensure loyalty. The ruler's portrait may have had some protective power, but Seebold does not consider the bracteates as such amuletic, and definitely not as portraits of gods. His arguments seem, however, weakly founded, and also his readings of the runic inscriptions appear to be controversial.

Birgit Arrhenius (1992) accepts Hauck's interpretation of bracteate iconography as focused on Odin, but also Andrén's concept of them being a political medium, in spite of the fact that this view is based on a "secular" interpretation, especially of the inscriptions. Her main focus is, however, to stress the economic independence of women, seeing the gold hoards, often found in house remains, as the family's or especially the house-wife's possession, acquired through dowry and morning gift.

In a recent paper Marta Lindeberg (1997) stresses that the bracteates are to be connected with both men and women. She accepts Andrén's interpretation of *alu* and *laðu* as referring to feasts, but sees the women as hosts. She also accepts Hauck's interpretations, as summarized by other authors like myself, but stresses the peaceful functions of the gods depicted. At the same time, however, she conjures up a picture of the current interpretations as being highly militaristic, which I find somewhat difficult to recognize.

Märít Gaimster (1992) likewise embraces both Hauck's interpretations and Andrén's concept of a political medium amongst her premises. With their symbolic content the bracteates are more than just ordinary jewellery, and besides they reflect both high social status and—especially outside of Scandinavia—foreign connections. She regards them as sort of 'special purpose money', which circulated as status gifts amongst members of the élite. In this

respect they can be compared with the Roman gold coins which were used only within a limited administrative sphere, and like the medallions had an important function as prestigious gifts.

Lotte Hedeager places the bracteates in a wider context (1997). Alongside Style I they are seen as expressions of the cosmology of the Scandinavians, and of Germanic peoples on the Continent who claimed descent from Scandinavia, in a phase of political and religious transformation. She interprets the large human head on the C-bracteates as Odin in his function as shaman, with the large animal and occasional birds and snakes as helping spirits.

My own view of the interpretations examined here is that Hauck has made so good a case for the religious content of the bracteate iconography that we can dismiss the interpretations of Andrén and Seebold which see their pictures as predominantly vernacular, as portraits of mundane rulers. I would take amuletic power as the primary function of the bracteates, but at the same time stress that we should not be too categorical in discerning different functions. The bracteate users hardly saw any contradiction between “amulet”, “status symbol”, “gift”, or “ethnic marker”. As pendants, the bracteate amulets were also beautiful pieces of jewellery, and like any gold object they were manifestly a sign of wealth and status. Thus they would be fitting presents, be it as a morning gift or to ensure loyalty. I have no firm answer to the question, to what extent bracteates may have been worn also by men. Their focus on Odin as a ruler and master of magic with powers for healing and vanquishing Death seems to express the cosmology of an ambitious élite. Outside Scandinavia their pagan iconography will have been a relevant marker for Germanic élites claiming a Scandinavian origin as a counterweight to the Christian Frankish realm (cf. Hedeager 1992*a*). Accordingly, they were produced locally both in Britain and on the Continent (Axboe & Hauck 1985, pp. 101 f.). And finally, the bracteate technique could be used to produce ‘local currency’ for Charon’s obols—really a case of “special purpose money”!

Perhaps we can compare them with medieval gold crosses. These were evidently made to be both valuable and beautiful besides their religious significance. They could be presented to men as well as to women, and if worn by a magnate might hint that he held his office by the Grace of God. And should one meet a dark creature in the middle of the night, one might hold the cross up for protection against Evil.

The medallion imitations

As for the medallion imitations, it is difficult to decide whether there is any continuity from them to the gold bracteates. The few graves with medallion imitations which can be exactly dated belong to the final part of the Late Ro-

man Iron Age, while the gold bracteates seem to begin only around the middle of the fifth century, that is something like two generations later (Axboe, 1999 *a, b*). However, there are some graves with medallion imitations and bronze vessels which can only be more broadly dated to the Late Roman or early Migration Period. There is also a small group of four Gotlandic die-linked pieces, three of them being double-sided like the medallion imitations, while the fourth is single-sided only, like the bracteates (IK 286, 1–4). Two of the pieces were found in graves of the Late Roman Period, one of them being very late, while the single-sided specimen is from an uncertain Migration Period context, and the fourth is a single find from the Early Iron Age ring-fort at Havor (Lamm & Axboe 1989, p. 472). It is impossible to decide whether the single-sided piece is an early experiment in bracteate technique (and whether it actually led on to the bracteates), or whether it was struck on an old die when bracteates were already current.

It is also doubtful whether there is a functional and religious continuity in more than a general sense from medallion imitations to gold bracteates. It is obvious that both types have Roman medallions as their point of departure, but the style of the bracteates seems to make a new start instead of continuing the development of the medallion imitations. Early bracteates like IK 354 from Senoren in Blekinge (M Pl. 3: 3) are closer to the Roman prototypes than most medallion imitations, and the recognizable imitations of Constans-inscriptions on the A-bracteates from Broholm on Fyn (M Pl. 3: 6, IK 47, 2–3) and Hov in Trøndelag (M Pl. 3: 5, IK 282) were obviously copied directly without intermediary links. According to Hauck's interpretations, the motifs on the imitations—apart from the portraits of Odin in the emperor's likeness—seem to focus on Balder (Hauck 1992, pp. 497 ff.). And though Balder also appears on some bracteates, it is evident that different motifs and episodes are depicted on bracteates and medallion imitations. Thus, while we may assume some continuity in the religious ideas underlying the amuletic pendants, it is obvious that they were expressed differently.

Patterns of deposition

But the bracteates had another function which is of great importance to archaeologists: they were deposited in graves and hoards, and thus played a role in the leading classes' communication with the Other World.

It is, however, conspicuous that the Scandinavian core area and northern Germany have yielded hoards only, while the graves with bracteates are circumferential to the bracteates' general distribution area: these occur in Norway, England and on the Continent (Gaimster, this volume, Fig. 1). Only in Norway and on Gotland do both types of finds occur, but the Gotlandic grave finds are, as already mentioned, the special 'Charon's bracteates'.

This distribution must, however, be seen in connection with the general find patterns of the areas involved. In southern Scandinavia, especially in Denmark, graves are rare in the early Migration Period and next to unknown in the later part when the bracteates flourished. So the lack of bracteates in Danish graves is not a feature specific to the bracteates but reflects a general scarcity of furnished graves. In Norway, where graves are more richly equipped throughout the Migration Period, bracteates do occur in graves, although hardly to the end of the period. Only three of the numerous Norwegian D-bracteates have been found in graves (Bakka 1973, p. 70), and the latest A–C-bracteates are also absent from the graves. This may, again, be part of a general trend, as the graves seem to become more sparse towards the end of the period. It is especially interesting that in western Norway, where bracteates did occur in earlier graves, the late graves tend to be less richly furnished, with less gold and imported objects than before (pers. comm. Siv Kristoffersen). In Västergötland the graves of the Migration Period seem to contain little or no gold, although the area is rich, also in terms of gold bracteates (pers. comm. Lars Lundqvist). The English and Continental bracteate graves follow the local patterns, where graves are well furnished while gold hoards seem to be absent. Thus it appears that the differing distribution of bracteate hoards and graves is not due to diverse functions of the bracteates in the areas involved, as proposed by André (1991, p. 246), but reflects the general pattern for deposition of gold and valuables.

A significant number of Migration Period gold hoards seems, to judge from their composition, to be “official” sacrifices made by the élite on behalf of the community (Hedeager 1991, 1992*b*, pp. 75 ff.; Hines 1989). These finds include arm- and neckrings, scabbard mounts, brooches and bracteates, in other words heavily status-bearing (possibly male) objects together with the brooches and bracteates which primarily seem to belong to women. Only the latter two types are known from graves in Scandinavia. Though we should not underestimate the social importance of status display at burials, one does get the impression that the grave goods were selected from amongst the items which had been used by the deceased, especially their jewellery. And like other amulets, bracteates must have been very personal things. This must be kept in mind when considering the large gold hoards as more ‘official’ sacrifices. It must have been a very serious matter to sacrifice rings, scabbard mounts and bracteates. They were not just valuables, but also expressions of one’s social role and status, respectively powerful amuletic protection.

The large gold hoards

This leads us to the second theme of this paper: Why and when were the large gold hoards of the late Migration Period deposited? As for the second part of

the question, the bracteates can contribute to the discussion, thanks to their occurrence in graves outside Scandinavia.

It is evident that the bracteates are one of the characteristic artefact-types of the Migration Period, and the D-bracteates, at least, seem to continue to the end of the period. The date of the transition to the Vendel Period has been debated for some years, with proposals ranging from approx. 520 to 560–70. The bracteates from datable Continental and English graves demonstrate that they could have been deposited all through the first half of the sixth century and even later (Axboe, 1999 *a, b*). It must be remembered, though, that they are outside their Scandinavian home area, some of them are exports, others local imitations. But it seems reasonable to infer that bracteates were produced and used in Scandinavia at least throughout the greater part of the first half of the sixth century. This fits well with Birgit Arrhenius' "transitional phase" around 550 (Arrhenius 1983, p. 68), and with a recent chronological proposal from Anne and Lars Jørgensen, dating the change in female fashion to c. 540 (Jørgensen & Nørgård Jørgensen 1997 Fig. 26).

The high quantity of gold finds are a unique feature of the Migration Period. Some of them evidently belong to the fifth century, like the hoards from Rynkeby (M cat. No. 64; IK 147) and Bostorp (A 189a; IK 221–223) which are important for the dating of the early bracteates (Axboe 1999 *a, b*). Other hoards are not closely dateable because they consist of bullion only. But several hoards include late bracteates such as D-bracteates. They must therefore have been deposited in the sixth century. Examples are the hoards from Darum and Skonager in western Jutland; Gudme II and Killerup on Fyn; Kitnæs on Sjælland; Madla, Sletner and Stavjordet in Norway; and Söderby with the new unique bracteate from Sweden (Lamm 1996), to mention just a few. Some of them include gold scabbard mounts, stylistically heralding Vendel Style B and forming a link to the Swedish Tureholm hoard which weighing more than 12 kg is the largest gold hoard known from Scandinavia. Thus we may speak of a rather closed group of finds from the first half of the sixth century, a *Fundhorizont*, although the actual depositions may have taken place across a period of time, perhaps one or two generations.

The Broholm find (M cat. No. 60), which with more than 4 kg is the largest Danish gold hoard (unless the two golden horns from Gallehus are to be considered as one deposition), may also be included in this late group. Amongst the recent additions to the hoard are 2 solidi struck for Valentinian III (425–455) and Zeno (474–491) (Kjer Michaelsen & Thomsen 1991) which, however, do not necessarily push the deposition beyond the late fifth century. The hoard includes no D-bracteates and most of its A–C-bracteates are rather early, but one of them must nevertheless be placed in my group H3 and thus most likely belongs to the sixth century (M Pl. 15: 3; IK 36; comp. Axboe 1999 *a, b*). There is also a fragment of a spiral gold scabbard mount, a type

which in Stavijordet is combined with filigree scabbards mounts and D-bracteates and in a new find from Uhrenholtgård at Gudme possibly with another filigree scabbard mount (Thrane 1994, pp. 111–113).

The massive golden sword-rings also seem to belong to the first half of the sixth century, as demonstrated by Krefeld-Gellep grave 1782 which also yielded a cloisonné sword bead related to the one in the Gudme II-hoard (Thrane 1994).

The A.D. 536 event

The gold hoards have been taken to indicate that after the Late Roman Iron Age the élite had consolidated its status and was sacrificing to the gods as maintainers of the established world order (Hedeager 1992*b*, pp. 80 f., 176 f., 251). Of course, this also applies to the finds of the fifth century, but in A.D. 536 and the few following years something happened which may have intensified sacrificial deposition enormously.

We have some contemporary witnesses to “the A.D. 536 event”. According to Procopius, who died approx. 560, during this year “a most dread portent took place. For the sun gave forth its light without brightness, like the moon, during this whole year, and it seemed exceedingly like the sun in eclipse, for the beams it shed were not clear nor such as it is accustomed to shed.” (Wars 4.14.5; Stothers & Rampino 1983, p. 6362.) Cassiodorus (c. 490–590) wrote that “the sun ... seems to have lost it wonted light, and appears of a bluish colour. We marvel to see no shadows of our bodies at noon, ... and the phenomena which accompany an eclipse prolonged through almost a year. We have had ... a summer without heat ... the crops have been chilled by north winds ...” (Baillie 1991, p. 234.) The Syriac chronicle associated with the name of Zacharias of Mytilene relates (9.19, 10.1; Stothers & Rampino 1983, p. 6362) that “the sun began to be darkened by day and the moon by night ... And, as the winter [in Mesopotamia] was a severe one, so much that from the large and unwonted quantity of snow the birds perished ..., there was distress ... among men ... from the evil things.”

And this was not restricted to the Mediterranean (Fig. 3). Dendrochronology records strongly reduced growth in oaks from Northern Ireland, Scotland and northern England, and less marked in Germany, too, and reveals that in Fennoscandinavia the year 536 had the second coldest summer in the last 1500 years—in fact summer temperatures remained low until about 550 (Baillie 1995, pp. 93 f.). The historical sources from the British Isles are questionable in this period, but it is suggestive that the British “*Annales Cambriae*” records “mortality in Britain and Ireland” for 537 (Baillie 1995, p. 94), and the Irish “*Annals of the Four Masters*” “failure of bread” in 536 and 539 (ib. pp. 83, 85). Finally, the Justinian plague appeared in the Mediterranean in

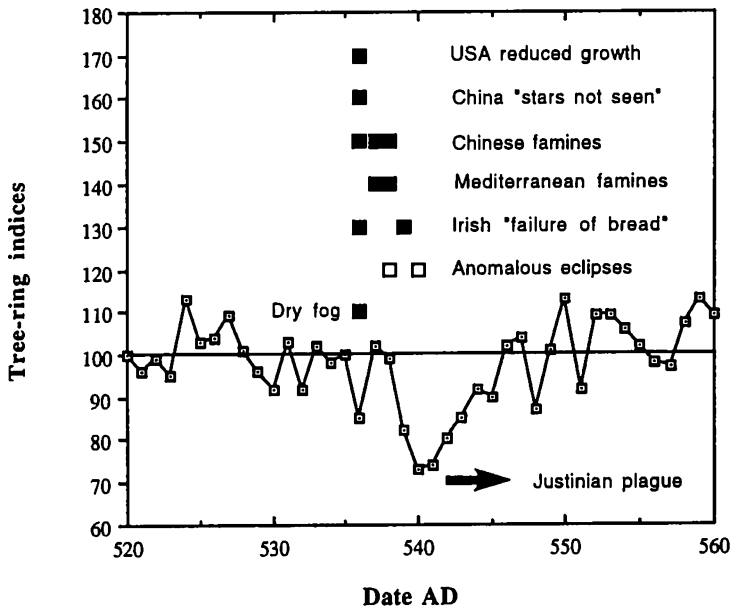


Fig. 3. The A.D. 536-event: Historical information, dendrochronologically proved reduced growth in Europe and USA, together with the annual resolution record of European oak showing notable reduction in growth at, and three to eight years after, the dust-veil of A.D. 536. After Baillie 1995.

542, to reach Ireland a few years later, perhaps flourishing in a population which was vulnerable from the preceding years of famine (ib. 94).

Indeed, the sky seems to have been covered by this 'dust-veil' in the whole northern hemisphere: dimmed stars and summer frost are reported in China for 536, with severe famines the following two years (Baillie 1995: 81), and in North America dendrochronology indicates cold years in 535, 536 and 541 (ib. 89).

The reason for all this is debatable. Michael Baillie, who associated the evidence from dendrochronology with the historical sources, tends to ascribe this and other similar events to volcanic eruptions recorded in Greenlandic ice-cores (Baillie 1991, 1994, 1995), while others doubt that such a connection can be established (e.g. Buckland et al. 1997), but this discussion is less important for our subject. It is also debatable whether the Justinian plague affected Scandinavia, as the rats essential for its spread seem to be absent (Näsman 1988, p. 245). But there can be little doubt that 536 was an extremely ominous and difficult year in Scandinavia, the blurring of the sun possibly being even more fatal here than in southern Europe, and the following years may have been rough, too. Actually, one might speculate whether we here have the background for the eschatological "Fimbul-winter" which together

with the darkening of sun and moon and other omens was to herald Ragnarok.

Be that as it may, one can imagine that in Scandinavia, as in Mesopotamia, “there was distress ... among men ... from the evil things”. This will really have been a situation calling for sacrifice of every sort, including even the most precious objects of gold available, to revive the dying sun and ward off the imminent end of the world. As already stated, 536 falls within the bracket of time where many large gold hoards were deposited. At the same time famine, perhaps accompanied by disease and unrest, might also cause an unusually large number of “safe deposit” hoards to be preserved because their owners died without telling about them.

I am not advocating some sort of general ‘catastrophe horizon’ because of the events around 536. Though these may have been tough years, which perhaps even saw the collapse of unstable centres or polities, this was not the end of society or of the religion of the Migration Period. My point relates much more to a social-psychological level: the constantly dimmed sun would be—and would be perceived as—a fundamental menace to human life, and thus be an acute impetus to sacrifice, which has an archaeological manifestation. And again, I do not see this as the cause of *all* gold hoards, only as a reasonable explanation of some large deposits which must be dated to the late Migration Period anyway.

On the other hand, this massive hoarding may be one reason why gold became so sparse from the beginning of the Vendel Period, and thus perhaps also why the gold bracteates disappeared. For the times had changed since the days when vast amounts of gold could be extorted from the Roman Empire. That golden age was only an episode, and no new supplies replaced the wealth which had been sacrificed in the large gold hoards.

Unlike, for example, the scutiform pendants, which occur both in gold and silver and occasionally even in bronze (Magnus 1975, pp. 47–54, 75–78), Migration Period bracteates in Scandinavia are made exclusively of gold. Perhaps this was indispensable, some sort of taboo. If so, it was not, however, taken over by the Anglo-Saxons, who also made silver bracteates with motifs in the Scandinavian tradition, a fact which may corroborate the idea that bracteates had a somewhat different function outside Scandinavia.

Thus it is conceivable that the golden age of the Migration Period ended in 536 with desperate sacrifices to revive the darkened sun, consuming what gold was available and thus putting an end to the production and use of gold rings, scabbard mounts and bracteates, stripping the élite of both their symbols of status and their amuletic protection. They may have considered it a good investment, after all. For after a time they saw the desired result of their sacrifices: the sun recovered, and life continued.

Acknowledgements: My thanks to Birger Storgaard, who drew my attention to the A.D. 536 event without knowing what it might lead to, to Siv Kristoffersen and Lars Lundqvist for information, to Charlotte Behr, Karl Hauck and the symposium participants for their comments, and to John Hines for gilding my English.

References

Abbreviations

A = Axboe 1981 (catalogue numbers)

IK = Axboe, Düwel, Hauck & v. Padberg 1985 sq. (catalogue numbers)

M = Mackeprang 1952

- Andrén, A., 1991. Guld och makt—en tolkning av de skandinaviska guldbrakteaternas funktion. In: Ch. Fabech & J. Ringtved (eds.), *Samfundsorganisation og Regional Variation. Norden i romersk jernalder og folkevandringstid*. Jysk Arkæologisk Selskabs Skrifter, 27, pp. 245–256. Århus/Højbjerg.
- Arrhenius, B., 1983. The chronology of the Vendel graves. In: J. P. Lamm & H.-Å. Nordström (eds.), *Vendel Period Studies*, pp. 39–70. Statens Historiska Museum, Stockholm.
- 1992. Smycken som diplomati. In: *Föremål som vittnesbörd. En festskrift til Gertrud Grenander Nyberg på 80-årsdagen den 26. juli 1992*, pp. 18–25. Nordiska Museet, Stockholm.
- Axboe, M., 1981. The Scandinavian Gold Bracteates. Studies on their manufacture and regional variations. With a supplement to the catalogue of Mogens B. Mackeprang. *Acta Archaeologica*, 52, pp. 1–100.
- 1991. Guld og guder i folkevandringstiden. Brakteaterne som kilde til politisk/religiøse forhold. In: Ch. Fabech & J. Ringtved (eds.), *Samfundsorganisation og Regional Variation. Norden i romersk jernalder og folkevandringstid*. Jysk Arkæologisk Selskabs Skrifter, 27, pp. 187–202. Århus/Højbjerg.
- 1994. Goldbrakteaten und Dänenkonige. In: H. Keller & N. Staubach (eds.), *Ikonologia Sacra. Festschrift für Karl Hauck zum 75. Geburtstag*. Arbeiten zur Frühmittelalterforschung, 23, pp. 144–155. Berlin—New York.
- 1995. Danish Kings and Dendrochronology: Archaeological Insights into the Early History of the Danish State. In: G. Ausenda (ed.), *After Empire. Towards an Ethnology of Europe's Barbarians*, pp. 217–251. Woodbridge.
- 1999 a. The chronology of the Scandinavian gold bracteates. In: J. Hines, K. Højlund Nielsen & F. Siegmund (eds.), *The Pace of Change. Studies in Early-Medieval Chronology*, pp. 126–147. Oxbow monographs, Oxford.
- 1999 b. Die Chronologie der Goldbrakteaten—regional und überregional. In: U. v. Freeden et al. (eds.), *Völker an Nord- und Ostsee und die Franken: Akten des 48. Sachsensymposiums in Mannheim vom 7. bis 11. September 1997* pp. 61–73. Deutsche Archäologische Institut. Römisch-Germanische Kommission.
- Axboe, M., Düwel, K., Hauck, K. & v. Padberg, L., 1985 sq. *Die Goldbrakteaten der Völkerwanderungszeit*. Vol. 1, 1–3 1985, vol. 2, 1–2 1986, vol. 3, 1–2 1989, vol. 4 in prep. Münstersche Mittelalter-Schriften, 24.
- Axboe, M. & Hauck, K., 1985. Hohenmemmingen-B, ein Schlüsselstück der Braktea-

- tenikonographie (Zur Ikonologie der Goldbrakteaten XXXI). *Frühmittelalterliche Studien*, 19, pp. 98–130.
- Baillie, M. G. L., 1991. Marking in marker dates: towards an archaeology with historical precision. *World Archaeology*, 23:2, pp. 233–243.
- 1994. Dendrochronology raises questions about the nature of the A.D. 536 dust-veil event. *The Holocene*, 4:2, pp. 212–217.
- 1995. *A Slice through Time. Dendrochronology and precision dating*. Batsford, London.
- Bakka, E., 1973. Goldbrakteaten in norwegischen Grabfunden: Datierungsfragen. *Frühmittelalterliche Studien*, 7, pp. 53–87.
- Buckland, P. C., Dugmore A. J., & Edwards, K. J., 1997. Bronze Age myths? Volcanic activity and human response in the Mediterranean and North Atlantic regions. *Antiquity*, 71, pp. 581–93.
- Bursche, A. 2001. Roman gold medallions as power symbols of the Germanic élite. *KVHAA Konferenser 51*. Stockholm.
- Düwel, K., 1988. Buchstabenmagie und Alphabetzauber. Zu den Inschriften der Goldbrakteaten und ihrer Funktion als Amulette. *Frühmittelalterliche Studien*, 22, pp. 70–110.
- Gaimster, M., 1992. Scandinavian Gold Bracteates in Britain. Money and Media in the Dark Ages. *Medieval Scandinavia*, 36, pp. 1–28.
- 2001. Gold bracteates and necklaces, *KVHAA Konferenser 51*. Stockholm.
- Gladigow, B., 1992. Schutz durch Bilder. Bildmotive und Verwendungsweisen antiker Amulette. In: K. Hauck (ed.), *Der historische Horizont der Götterbild-Amulette aus der Übergangsepoche von der Spätantike zum Frühmittelalter*. Abhandlungen der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen, Philologisch-Historische Klasse, Dritte Folge Nr. 200, pp. 12–31. Göttingen.
- Green, D., 1995. The Rise of Germania in the Light of Linguistic Evidence. In: G. Ausenda (ed.), *After Empire. Towards an Ethnology of Europe's Barbarians*, pp. 143–162. Woodbridge.
- Hauck, K., 1988. Zwanzig Jahre Brakteatenforschung in Münster/Westfalen (Zur Ikonologie der Goldbrakteaten XL). *Frühmittelalterliche Studien*, 22, pp. 17–52.
- 1992. Frühmittelalterliche Bildüberlieferung und der organisierte Kult (Zur Ikonologie der Goldbrakteaten XLIV) In: K. Hauck (ed.), *Der historische Horizont der Götterbild-Amulette aus der Übergangsepoche von der Spätantike zum Frühmittelalter*. Abhandlungen der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen, Philologisch-Historische Klasse, Dritte Folge Nr. 200, pp. 433–574. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen.
- 1998 a. Der Kollierfund vom finischen Gudme und das Mythenwissen skandinavischer Führungsschichten in der Mitte des Ersten Jahrtausends. Mit zwei runologischen Beiträgen von Wilhelm Heizmann (Zur Ikonologie der Goldbrakteaten LV). In: D. Geuenich (ed.), *Die Alemannen und Franken bis zur 'Schlacht bei Zülpich' (496/97)*. Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde, 17. Walter de Gruyter, Berlin–New York.
- 1998 b. Zur religionsgeschichtlichen Auswertung von Bildchiffren und Runen der völkerwanderungszeitlichen Goldbrakteaten (Zur Ikonologie der Goldbrakteaten LVI). In: K. Düwel (ed.), *Runeninschriften als Quellen interdisziplinärer Forschung*. Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde, 15, pp. 298–353. Walter de Gruyter, Berlin–New York.
- 1998 c. Die runenkundigen Erfinder von den Bildchiffren der Goldbrakteaten (Zur Ikonologie der Goldbrakteaten LVII). *Frühmittelalterliche Studien*, 32, pp. 28–56.

- 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, pp. 316–370.
- Hedeager, L., 1991. Gulddepoterne fra ældre germanertid—forsøg på en tolkning. In: Ch. Fabech & J. Ringtved (eds.), *Samfundsorganisation og Regional Variation. Norden i romersk jernalder og folkevandringstid*. Jysk Arkæologisk Selskabs Skrifter, 27, pp. 203–212. Århus–Højbjerg.
- 1992a. Kingdoms, Ethnicity and Material Culture: Denmark in a European Perspective. In: M. O. H. Carver (ed.), *The Age of Sutton Hoo*, pp. 279–300. Woodbridge.
- 1992b. Iron Age Societies: *From Tribe to State in Northern Europe, 500 BC to AD 700*. Oxford.
- 1997. *Skygger af en anden virkelighed. Oldnordiske myter*. Samlerens Universitet, København.
- Heizmann, W., 1987. Bildformel und Formelwort. Zu den laukaR-Inschriften auf Goldbrakteaten der Völkerwanderungszeit. In: *Runor och runinskrifter: Föredrag vid Riksantikvarieämbetets och Vitterhetsakademiens symposium 8–11 september 1985*. KVHAA Konferenser, 15, pp. 145–153. Stockholm.
- 1992. Lein(en) und Lauch in der Inschrift von Fløksand und im Vølsa þáttur. In: H. Beck et al. (eds.), *Germanische Religionsgeschichte. Quellen und Quellenprobleme*, pp. 365–395. Berlin–New York.
- Hines, J., 1989. Ritual Hoarding in Migration-Period Scandinavia: A Review of Recent Interpretations. *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society*, 55, pp. 193–205.
- Jürgensen Thomsen, C., 1855. Om Guldbrakeaterne og om Brakteaternes tidligste Brug som Mynt. *Annaler for nordisk Oldkyndighed og Historie 1855*, pp. 265–347.
- Jørgensen, L. & Nørgård Jørgensen, A., 1997. *Nørre Sandegård Vest. A Cemetery from the 6th – 8th Centuries on Bornholm*. Nordiske Fortidsminder, Serie B vol. 14. København.
- Kjer Michaelsen, K. & Thomsen, P. O., 1991. Broholmsskatten. Historien om et guld-fund. *Årbog for Svendborg & Omegns Museum 1991*, pp. 8–23.
- Lamm, J. P., 1996. Jackpot för Efterundersökningsprojektet. *En årskrönika från Statens historiska museer 1996*, pp. 18–19.
- Lamm, J. P. & Axboe, M., 1989. Neues zu Brakteaten und Anhängern in Schweden. *Frühmittelalterliche Studien*, 23, pp. 453–477.
- Lindeberg, M., 1997. Gold, Gods and Women. *Current Swedish Archaeology*, 5, pp. 99–110.
- Mackeprang, M. B., 1952. *De nordiske Guldbrakeater*. Jysk Arkæologisk Selskabs Skrifter, 2. Århus.
- Magnus, B., 1975. *Krosshaugfunnet. Et forsøk på kronologisk og stilhistorisk plassering i 5. årh*. Stavanger Museums Skrifter 9.
- Näsman, U., 1988. Den folkvandringstida ? krisen i Sydsandinavien, inklusive Öland og Gotland. In: U. Näsman & J. Lund (eds.), *Folkevandringstiden i Norden. En krisetid mellem ældre og yngre jernalder*, pp. 227–255. Århus.
- Ramus, C., 1803. Om Brakteaterne og i Besynderlighed om deres foregivne Oprindelse fra Norden. *Skandinavisk Museum, ved et Selskab, for Aaret 1803*, pp. 117–148.
- Rausing, G., 1995. The days of the week and Dark Age politics. *Fornvännen*, 90, pp. 231–239.
- Schröter, Th. A. & Gummel, H., 1957. Der Goldbrakteatenfund aus Sievern. *Die Kunde 1957*, pp. 112–129.

- Seebold, E., 1992. Römische Münzbilder und germanische Symbolwelt. Versuch einer Deutung der Bildelemente von C-Brakteaten. In: H. Beck et al. (eds.), *Germanische Religionsgeschichte. Quellen und Quellenprobleme*. Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde, 5, pp. 270–335. Berlin–New York.
- 1994. Das erste Auftreten germanischer Bildelemente und Runen auf den Goldbrakteaten der Völkerwanderungszeit. In: H. Ucker (ed.), *Studien zum Altgermanischen. Festschrift für Heinrich Beck*. Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde, 11, pp. 601–618. Walter de Gruyter, Berlin–New York.
- Stothers, R. B. & Rampino, M. R., 1983. Volcanic Eruptions in the Mediterranean Before A.D. 630. From Written and Archaeological Sources. *Journal of Geophysical Research* Vol. 88, No. B8, pp. 6357–6371.
- Thrane, H., 1994. Goldene Schwertteile der Völkerwanderungszeit aus Gudme auf Fünen, Dänemark. In: H. Keller & N. Staubach (eds.), *Iconologia Sacra. Festschrift für Karl Hauck zum 75. Geburtstag*. Arbeiten zur Frühmittelalterforschung, 23, pp. 106–117.
- Vierck, H., 1981. Imitatio imperii und interpretatio Germanica vor der Wikingerzeit. In: R. Zeitler (ed.), *Les pays du Nord et Byzance*. Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis. Figura, Nova Series, 19, pp. 64–113. Uppsala.