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Bishop coins from Viborg?

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Under Canute the Great (1018-35), a regular, well-ordered coinage was introduced to Denmark, and Viborg appears as a mint from the very beginning.¹ Indeed, the very first time we find the name of the city written down is on the coins – often distorted, but regarded by scholars as clearly identifiable.² The king's portrait can be seen on several obverses, with a legend giving his name. On the reverse, we find the name of the moneyer, along with the various spellings of Viborg.³ There can be no doubt as to who owns the mint right: the king. And so it goes down through a number of regents. Our great numismatist, P. Hauberg (1844-1928) even thought that in Viborg, the King retained the mint right in full, in contrast to the other major Danish mints, Lund, Roskilde, Ribe and Slesvig.⁴ However, he doesn't always make a categorical statement, probably be-

cause he has insufficient proof – written sources do not mention Viborg as a mint until 1231, in *Kong Valdemar's Jordebog*.⁵

The work of dating and attributing to the various mints for Denmark's medieval coins constitutes quite a complicated jigsaw puzzle, which is still being assembled. The lack of adequate and concurrent written sources very often forces numismatists to form hypotheses and – often preliminary – conclusions based on the actual coin finds. Types, inscriptions, and find sites form the mainstay of research. But as will be seen in the following, there will often be considerable uncertainty as to the attribution of individual coin types, and the Viborg bishops' role in Danish coinage is no exception.

The person with whom the king most often shared the right to strike coins – or more precisely the revenues of minting – was the bishop. This delegation is often shown by a portrait of king and bishop, each on one side of the coin: the king with crown and sceptre, the bishop with mitre and crosier.

Hauberg's claim that the king had exclusive right to mint at Viborg is striking, and in fact it does not seem that it can be sustained. As early as 1849, the head of the National Museum, Christian Jürgensen

1 The article is a revision of a manuscript prepared in 1982. My thanks to Jørgen Steen Jensen for his habitually knowledgeable and critical comments on the 1982 manuscript.

2 *Viborg Amts Stednavne* 1948, 1.

3 A review of minting in Viborg in the 1000s – showing the various spellings of the city's name – was prepared by Jørgen Steen Jensen 1973. The city name is shown in the captions on p. 185.

4 Most comprehensively in Hauberg 1900, 65.

5 *Kong Valdemars Jordebog* 1980, 4 (Latin) and 94 (translation); Mørkholm 1955, 8.

Thomsen, in an article published in M.R. Ursin's *Stiftsstaden Viborg*, drew attention to a coin with the head and shoulders of a king on one side and a bishop on the other (**Fig. 6**). The bishop is surrounded by the letters G and V, which Thomsen assumes to stand for Gunnar of Viborg (1222-51). But with the above conception, Hauberg had to think that the letters stood for Gunnar of Ribe (1230-45).⁶

A more definite identification as belonging to Viborg seems, however, to apply to a slightly older coin with the letters AS around a cross on the reverse while the obverse shows a king's portrait (**Fig. 5**). Hauberg attributes the coin to Valdemar II "the Victorious" (1202-41) and Slesvig,⁷ but as pointed out by Georg Galster in 1981, Viborg is more probable, ascribing the letters to one of the city's two bishops ASker (1191-1209), or ASgot (1209-20).⁸

So we should not simply – in spite of Hauberg's claim – discount Viborg as the site of an episcopal mint, and it may well pay to take a fresh look at the situation. How long ago can this – hypothetical – coining have begun, and if it did, was it continued by the bishops over a longer period? A starting point must be the coins themselves, since available written sources are silent on the subject.⁹

In 1978, Galster argued that early on, Canute the Holy¹⁰ gave the right to mint coins to the bishop of Roskilde, Sweyn Nordmand. His arguments will not be repeated here, I will simply point out that the coin in question has on its obverse the portrait of a bishop with the legend SVEIN, on the reverse a cross with the inscription SIBBI I ROSC. Galster says of the portrait of the bishop, that it has "a tonsure in the hair like a halo".¹¹

A coin from Viborg of about the same date also has a picture of a bishop on the obverse, with the legend ALGOT N, and on the reverse a jewel cross with the legend DE + VVIBERGA (**Fig. 1**). C.J. Thomsen attributed the then privately owned coin to Harald Hen (1075-80), as a similar type, but without crosier, was struck in the name of Harald in Lund.¹² In this Hauberg follows his learned numismatic predecessor. He interprets the figure holding the crosier as a saint.¹³ The beading around the bishop's head, often seen on early medieval coins, can naturally very well be perceived as a halo. Or perhaps provocatively as a sign of a tonsure, as Galster pointed out in the case of the Sweyn Normand coin from Roskilde?

Hauberg naturally attributes a similar coin with a bishop figure/cross and the legends CNUT RE / RAINERE I LVN to Canute the Holy's coins from Lund.¹⁴

Canute's interest for the church in Lund in the 1080s is well-documented – for instance, Saxo mentions that he gave a fourth of his income from coins there to the bishop¹⁵ – so it cannot be ruled out that the portrait of a bishop on the coin is there because the King in Lund – as we assume was the case in Roskilde – had given some of his coinage rights to the church. The similar Viborg coin mentioned above can probably equally as well be attributed to Canute the Holy's reign as to that of Harald Hen.¹⁶ In both cases, the bishop portrait may show the first head of the Viborg diocese, Heribert¹⁷ – that is, if the figure is to be interpreted as the portrait

6 Thomsen 1849, 273, drawing of coin; Hauberg 1906, 38 and 58, Tab VI no. 39.

7 Hauberg 1906, 40, 59, Tab VI no.44. Hauberg motivates attribution to Slesvig with the appearance of the letter S.

8 Galster 1981, 102.

9 The subject of the Viborg bishops' right to mint is naturally often mentioned in numismatic literature, including Grinder-Hansen 2000, 60, where the lack of written evidence for "the diocese having attained a share in revenue from coins" is pointed out.

10 Galster 1978, 83-84.

11 Galster 1978, 83.

12 Hauberg 1900 Tab XI Harald Hen, Lund 1.

13 Thomsen 1849, 273, with a drawing of the coin, which was obtained by the Royal Collection of coins and medals in 1880; Hauberg 1900, 226 shows a variant of the type.

14 Hauberg 1900, Tab. XI, Canute the Holy, Lund 1.

15 Saxo's 11th book, chapt. 12. On Canute the Holy's gift in the new Saxo edition 2005, vol. 2, p. 44 (Latin) and 45 (Danish).

16 If the coin is attributed to Viborg and Canute the Holy, it should be placed early in his reign, since the king's later minting in Jutland are of poorer weight and fineness. See Galster 1935, 135.

17 We know little about Heribert. He began his episcopate with the establishment of the diocese 1057/1060. His successor, Eskild, took up the office before 1122. See Gelting 1992, 119-120



Fig. 1. Coin struck in Viborg under Harald Hen or Canute the Holy. The figure on the front is presumed, although with great reservation, to be Heribert, the first bishop of Viborg. Scale 2:1. (Photo: The Royal collection of coins and medals)



Fig. 2. Bracteate from the Græse find deposited approx. 1130. The portrait may possibly be Bishop Eskild (killed 1132/1133). Scale 2:1. (Photo: The Royal collection of coins and medals)



Fig. 3. Coin struck under Sweyn Grathe. If coins, as proposed by Hauberg, are to be attributed to a Viborg mint, the three towers on the reverse can be a portrayal of the east end of the cathedral as it appeared around 1150, or the motif can be intended simply as a sign for "cathedral". (Photo: The Royal collection of coins and medals)



Fig. 4. Bracteate struck in northern Jutland, probably under Valdemar the Great, in which case the two figures most likely portray the king and Niels, Bishop of Viborg (1154-91). Scale 2:1. (Photo: The Royal collection of coins and medals)



Fig. 5. Coin struck under Valdemar the Victorious, whose portrait is seen on the obverse. The AS on the reverse must stand for one of the two bishops of Viborg, Asker (1191-1208) or Asgot (1208-20). In either case, the coin must have been struck in Viborg. Scale 2:1. (Photo: The Royal collection of coins and medals)



Fig. 6. Coin struck under Valdemar the Victorious, whose portrait is seen on the face. The bishop on the reverse, because of the letters GV, must represent the famous Gunnar (1222-51). Scale: 2:1 (Photo: The Royal collection of coins and medals)

of a contemporary bishop and not that of an older saint.¹⁸

Eskild, Heribert's successor on the bishop's throne, was killed in 1132/33. At about the same time, the famous coin hoard found in 1912 in Græse near Frederikssund in northern Sealand was deposited. A single bracteate with a bishop portrait is attributed to Norway by Galster in the 1955 publication of the hoard,¹⁹ but in 1981 he argues that the coin should be attributed to Viborg and Eskild (**Fig. 2**).²⁰ In 1985, Gert Posselt, in the article *Nogle danske mønter med gejstlige fremstillinger før ca 1150* cites Galster's views, but concludes that the bracteate probably should still be assumed to have been struck in Norway.²¹

The use of bracteates appears in northern Jutland shortly afterward, in a series of issues from the times of civil war between Sweyn III, Canute V and Valdemar the Great.²² But the uniface bracteates also occasionally appear in finds from the period after Valdemar became sole ruler after the battle of Grathe Heath in 1157. One of these shows a king and a bishop (**Fig. 4**). The coin is attributed by Hauberg in 1906 to Valdemar the Great's reign (1157-1182) and the bishop can best be viewed as being the Viborg Bishop Niels (1154-91).²³

In 1900 Hauberg attempts to explain these ecclesiastical elements "as an expression of the friendly relations of Crown and Church" or by regarding the

coins as "a kind of medal or memorial issue".²⁴ It is doubtful that he had found the correct interpretation, although the arguments in themselves are reasonable, considering Hauberg's standpoint.

However, the above draws attention, perhaps a little provocatively, to a number of arguments in favour of the theory that the bishop of Viborg – like his colleagues from other larger Danish mints – can have had a share in the royal coinage. A number of possible examples of coins are shown from almost all the Viborg bishops up to Gunnar (1222-1251). One marked exception, however, is Sweyn, of the powerful Thorgunna family, who, after two decades on the bishop's throne – died on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land in about 1153, and was buried on the Mount of Olives.²⁵ A single coin – minted under Sweyn III (Sweyn Grathe) – should, however, be noted in this connection. On one side, we see the king with his sceptre and the word REX, on the other side, three towers over three abutting arches and the legend SVEN DANORUM (**Fig. 3**). Hauberg attributes the coin, of which is known several varieties, to Sweyn Grathe (1146-54) and Viborg,²⁶ and it is possible this attribution can be maintained, at least for the time being (although Jørgen Steen Jensen has attributed it to Lund on the basis of the Bårarp hoard from Halland²⁷). But what does the reverse side of the coin show? The three towers could indicate a church – the cathedral – which also has been pointed out by p. Severinsen.²⁸ If this interpretation is correct, and if we maintain the attribution to Viborg, it cannot be referring to the finished church – the west façade was not yet completed!²⁹ But it could be the two towers of the east end and the spire of the crossing between the nave and the transepts, or it may be a portrayal of a symbolic church building. Its occurrence on the king's coins could then be because of his contribution to the construction of the church around 1150 under Bishop Sweyn.

18 We should also consider, as proposed in 2007 by Jens Christian Moesgaard, whether the Viborg coin is simply an imitation of the Lund coin with the same motifs (pers. com.). See also Moesgaard 2007, catalogue nos. 3-4.

19 Galster 1955, 75-76, no. 230.

20 Galster 1981 p. 102, Fig. 6. Two other coins with the same type are included and pictured in the brief article, Figs. 4 and 5. Fig. 5 is bifacial.

21 Posselt 1985 p. 210; the Norwegian provenance is maintained in 1992 in *DMS*, vol 1, 280-281.

22 Bendixen 1967, 30.

23 Hauberg 1906, Tab. II 29, with the designation "unknown mint in north Jutland" In Severinsen 1932, 135, the bracteate is shown together with the obverse of another coin (Hauberg 1906 Tab II 20) with king-and-bishop portraits. Hauberg attributes the latter coin to Viborg, but it is more probably from Ribe.

24 Hauberg 1900, 34.

25 Vellev 1982, Vellev 1996.

26 Hauberg 1906, 41, Tab. I Sweyn Grathe no. 3.

27 Jensen 1983, 119-120. Attribution accepted by Palm 2002, 5, and Bornestaf 2003, 101.

28 Severinsen 1932, 103.

29 Vellev 1991, 213-214 points out that the west facade of the church was not completed until the late Roman period in the first half of the 1200s.

The rather meagre result of the above review shows that the king, through his coinage in Viborg in the late middle ages, may have shared the revenues with the bishop. The source material – the actual coins – cannot, however, completely fulfil modern requirements for documentation.

But it is difficult to imagine Viborg as the only exception to an empowerment otherwise bestowed on all higher ecclesiastics in the other large mint towns with episcopal sees. However, numismatic work on the coinage of the time is so complicated a task that redistribution of a number of types would quite possibly give other – better – examples of the Bishop of Viborg's share in this lucrative enterprise. His cathedral construction required a considerable and continuous source of income.

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