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*Coinage and Monetary Circulation
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Coinage and Monetary Circulation in Norway from the Middle of the 14th Century till c. 1500

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Of the many countries involved here in this symposium Norway is, I think, the only one without a Baltic coast. Geography has made Norway face other waters, a fact that has directed her political and economic connections since prehistoric times. The beginning of the 14th century, though, saw a certain orientation, more or less voluntary, southwards and eastwards.

King Håkon V, who had made Oslo the centre of Eastern Norway, his new capital – instead of western Bergen –, died in 1319. Since he left no sons, the Norwegian throne went to his three year-old grandson Magnus, a result of his daughter Ingebjørg's marriage to the Swedish duke Erik Magnusson. Duke Erik had been murdered the year before (1318) by his brother, the Swedish King Birger, who now lived in exile in Denmark.

Two months after he had inherited the Norwegian crown, little Magnus was elected king of Sweden. A period of five hundred years then began when Norway lived in continuous political union with one of the two other Scandinavian states, in shorter periods even with both of them at the same time.

Within these unions Norway usually was the minor and weaker part. With one exception only, the twenty-five year-long reign of King Håkon VI (1355–1380), the king with his court and administration used to live outside the country. It was primarily due to these circumstances, I think, that the Norwegian coining activity came to a stop for almost exactly one hundred years. At least, we do not have in our fairly rich material any pieces of indisputable Norwegian provenance from the time between the death of King Olav Håkonsson in 1387 and the accession to the throne of King Hans in 1483.

In his accession declaration¹ King Hans had promised that coins, equal in value with Danish coins, were to be struck at Oslo, Bergen, and at Nidaros (*i.e.* Trondheim) “according to the archbishop's privilege”. This

¹ *Danske Kongers Haandfæstninger. Aarsberetninger fra Det Kongelige Geheimearchiv indeholdende Bidrag til dansk Historie af utrykte Kilder* udgivne af C. F. Wegener. II. København 1856–60, 50. Reprinted Copenhagen 1974. C. I. Schive, 1865, 132. G. Galster, 1972, 38, 96 note 171.

coining privilege² of the Norwegian archbishop going back to the early 1220's was withdrawn by King Eirik Magnusson ("Prestehater") in 1281.³ The privilege was restored and confirmed by King Christiern I in 1458,⁴ but there is no reason to believe that this ecclesiastical coining at Nidaros was resumed until the early days of King Hans' reign.

From now on *skillings*, *half-skillings* and, first of all, *witten*-pieces were struck. All these denominations are known with the Bergen mint signature (*8). *Wittens*, which in their inscriptions, their crowned monograms or the axe (*9) allude to the national patron, St. Olav,⁵ were certainly issued at Trondheim, where some collaboration between a royal and an ecclesiastical mint seems to have been in operation. A *witten* group with reverse legends reading *Moneta Norwei*, "The money of Norway", around Norway's coat-of-arms may have been struck at Oslo.⁶ Bracteates (of the *Hohlpfennig* type) with Norway's coat-of-arms belong to the same period,⁷ and have their parallels in bracteates with the partial coat-of-arms of the archbishopric.⁸

By this new coinage of King Hans and the parallel coining of the Archbishop a monetary system based on the Lübeck coin reckoning and the *mark* of Cologne was introduced in Norway. The parallel to the Danish monetary system was confirmed by King Hans' successor Christian II in 1514. From that year we have the first known Norwegian coining act,⁹ declaring that Danish coins were to be current in Norway, and Norwegian coins were to be current in Denmark, the gold and silver weight should be the same in the two countries, and the common weight base should be the *mark* of Cologne.

The Norwegian coins were still struck with specific Norwegian types, and until 1537 in the obverse legends the king used the Norwegian title only.

If we now go behind the great break in the Norwegian late medieval coinage, legends are unfortunately lacking on all the post-1319 strikings. Bracteates with a crowned letter **R** are identified as struck for King Håkon VI (1355–1380) (*60), as similar coins with a crowned letter **O** are attributed to his son and successor Olav Håkonsson (1380–1387).¹⁰

² *DN* III no. 1.

³ *DN* III no. 30.

⁴ *DN* XIII no. 126.

⁵ *Schive* XIV 26–36.

⁶ *Schive* XIV 12–30.

⁷ *Schive* XIV 37.

⁸ *Schive* XVII 29–30. *Galster* 1972, 75 nos. 178–181.

⁹ G. Galster. *Christiern II's danske Mønter. Norsk Numismatisk Forenings Småskrifter*. No. 3. Oslo 1928, S. J. Wilcke. *Renæssancens Mønt- og Pengeforhold 1481–1588*. København 1950, 153 ff.

¹⁰ *Schive* XII 45–47, 50–52.

Magnus Eriksson seems to have issued anonymous coins only, both in Norway¹¹ and in Sweden.¹² To his long reign (in Norway 1319–1355, in Sweden 1319–1363) are attributed two-sided coins (pennies and halfpennies) as well as bracteates. That the attribution by countries raises some problems is by no means surprising. The two-sided coins of this period are generally rather badly struck. It is not always easy to distinguish the Norwegian lion from the same heraldic animal, which happened to be the badge of the Swedish royal family, the Folkunge dynasty. Moreover, as it seems, there most probably was a monetary union between Norway and Sweden around the middle of the 14th century. Even if struck with different types, the coins of the two kingdoms were equal in weight and fineness, and even in style and fabric.

This monetary union, however, was only ephemeral. By the 1360's, probably, the two countries departed from the common track. This fact becomes apparent if we compare a Norwegian group of bracteates with the contemporary Swedish issues of the same category. The type is a crowned head facing,¹³ in Norwegian late medieval coinage a small and limited group, but in Sweden a very extensively coined type, lasting from the early 14th century till the early 16th century.

Thanks to recent studies by Brita Malmer, published in her book on late medieval pennies in Sweden,¹⁴ we now have a more reliable chronological arrangement of the vast Swedish bracteate group. Neutron activation analyses carried out at the Norwegian *Institutt for Atomenergi* have provided essential data for dividing up the Swedish group.

The Norwegian bracteates of crowned head facing distinguish themselves with a much lower silver content than the contemporary Swedish ones: *c.* 20% Ag to *c.* 50% Ag. On the other hand the weights of the Norwegian bracteates are considerably higher than the Swedish issues: *c.* 0.60g against *c.* 0.30g or a little less. The Norwegian group belongs chronologically to the third quarter of the 14th century. A big Swedish hoard containing one specimen of these heavy bracteates from the Vårfrue church, Skänninge in Östergötland, has a Stralsund *witten* of 1379/81 as its latest coin.¹⁵

¹¹ Cf. *Schive* XI 12–22, XII 48–49, 60–73; Schive admittedly attributed the last 14 coins to King Håkon VI (1355–1380), the previous two to King Olav Håkonsson (1380–1387). N. L. Rasmusson. *Studier i norsk mynthistorie under tiden c:a 1270–1513*. II 1319–1481. *Fornvännen* 1943, 267–81.

¹² B. Thordeman. *Sveriges medeltidsmynt*. *Nordisk Kultur* XXIX, 1936, 1–92, 31–34 (*Grupp* XVIII–XXI); L. O. Lagerqvist 1970, 84–94 (*Grupp* XXIV–XXIX).

¹³ *Schive* XII 54–56. For the Swedish series, see Lagerqvist, 97–99 (*Grupp* XXXII), and B. Malmer 1980.

¹⁴ Malmer 1980.

¹⁵ Malmer 1980, 189 *Fynd* 117.

Substantial hoard evidence from Norwegian territory is practically completely lacking for this period. Again, we have to rely upon the cumulative finds from the medieval churches and church sites. These finds are quite unable to give the evidence for numismatic dating that a hoard material can establish. On the other hand, by these cumulative findings of coins, almost exclusively of the lower denominations, we are rather well informed about the monetary circulation throughout the country. The church finds also tell us about the coin stock that was once distributed among what we, with some reservations, may call the broader group of the population.

According to the church finds the Norwegian population used coins fairly extensively from the late 12th century. Till the first part of the 14th century, the finds clearly tell us, a very high percentage of these coins were struck in Norway.¹⁶ The church finds do not give justice to the impact of English pennies, the sterlings, which, according to hoards and written sources were widely circulated and used in Norway, especially from the late 13th century onwards. Now and then a single penny turns up among hundreds of other coins under a church floor. These English coins are quite often in the shape of cut halfpennies or cut farthings. One single noble from a little countryside church (Vinje, Telemark)¹⁷ in Eastern Norway reminds us of the Norwegians' use of that splendid gold coin, from the latter part of the 14th century. On the other hand, not a single gulden has so far turned up in the cumulative findings under our churches, so here another important chapter of Norway's monetary history is left out.

The gold coins as well as the higher and better silver denominations were the money of the great merchants and the members of high society, people operating on an international level. How could the need for coined money among the Norwegian people in general be met when the native coinage came to a stop at the end of the 14th century?

Or did the need for coins stop as well? We know that the Norwegian population and the Norwegian economy had suffered a severe blow from the Black Death. Something between one-third and one-quarter of the population is supposed to have perished in that fatal epidemic which struck the country from 1349 onwards. In any case this was an especially heavy loss to a sparsely populated country. With the political administration outside the country and the trade in the hands of the Hanseatic merchants we seem to have been really badly off.

Nevertheless, coins continued to circulate in Norway. The church finds

¹⁶ K. Skaare. *Myntene fra Lom kirke. Foreningen til norske Fortidsminnesmerkers Bevaring, Arbok* 1978, 113–130.

¹⁷ K. Skaare. *Universitetets Myntkabinett*, Oslo 1968. *NNÅ* 1969, 238–252, 246–247.

clearly demonstrate a widespread circulation of small coins, mainly bracteates of Swedish, Danish and German provenance.

Late medieval Swedish coins are known from 53 Norwegian church finds. A quick count yielded the result of 925 coins altogether. In this figure is included a small number of coins struck on Gotland, 14 specimens to be exact. The churches or church sites in question are scattered all over Norway, in all the three major regions into which the country can be conveniently divided, with proper regard to geographical and administrative conditions. That is: Eastern Norway, Western Norway, and Northern Norway. As one would suppose, these finds are most numerous (29) in Eastern Norway. But we should not forget that here we also have the largest number of churches excavated or investigated. The 15 church finds of Swedish late medieval coins from Western Norway show that these coins really had a countrywide circulation in Norway.

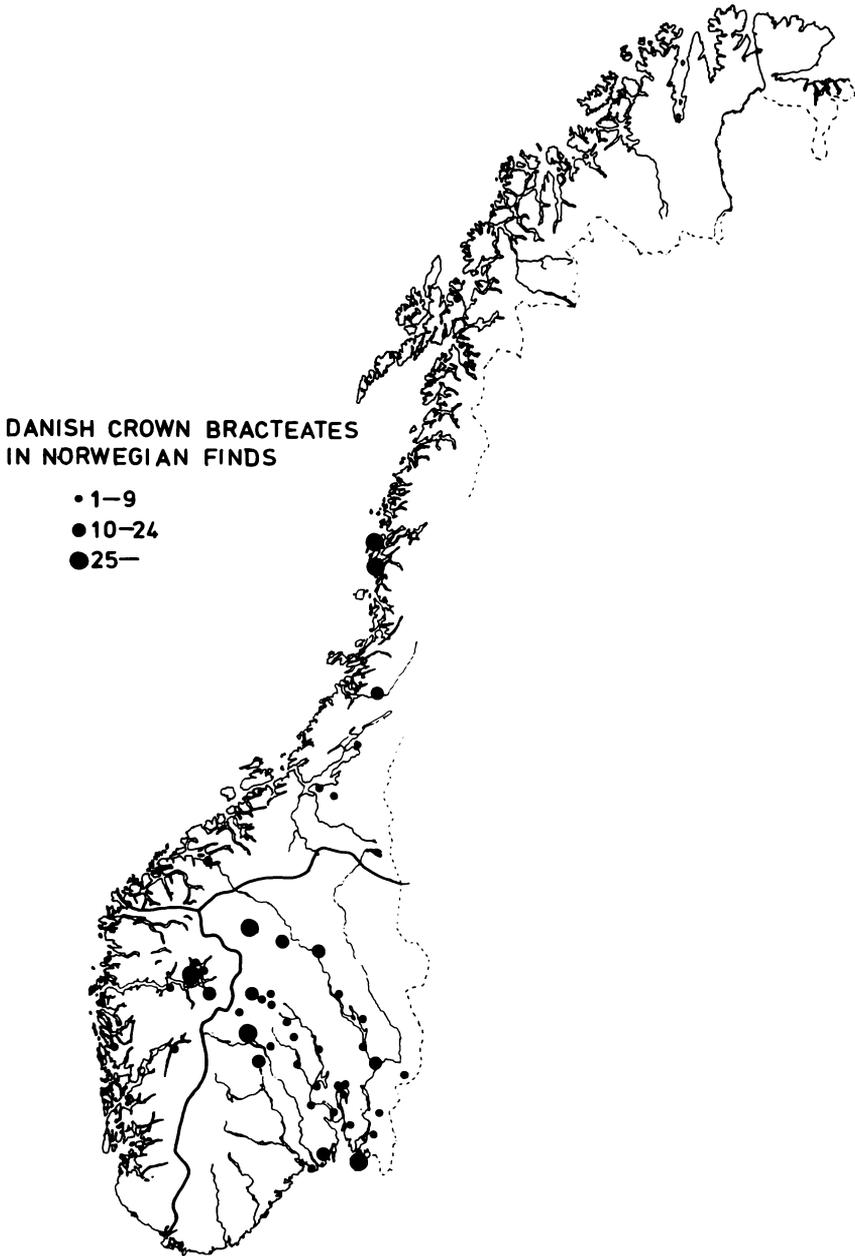
In the northern part of the country Swedish coins of this period occur in nine church finds. The northernmost extends close to the 69th degree of latitude: Tronden Church, near the present town of Harstad, Troms fylke.¹⁸ It is most interesting to note the concentration of Swedish coins in some churches in the Trondheim area (Mære: 74 coins, Ranem: 78 coins, Selbu: 33 coins). Selbu Church, south of Trondheim, deserves to be mentioned especially, as almost one-third of its total of 107 medieval coins were of Swedish provenance. To give a more justified picture of the part played by Swedish coins in Norwegian monetary history in that period, we ought to compare the number of Swedish coins to the total number of late medieval coins in a specific find or a specific find complex.

By the period here labelled "late medieval" we understand the time from c. 1300 till the Reformation which was introduced in Norway in 1537. The Swedish coins seem to represent about twenty percent of all the late medieval coins in Norwegian church finds.

Nearly a hundred of these Swedish coins – from twenty-five finds, from all three regions – belong to bracteate groups (Crowned head, Crowned letter A and Crowned letter S), which are dated, by Brita Malmer, to the 15th century. That means that they roughly coincide with the period when the Norwegian mints were idle.

In her studies of the Swedish bracteates Brita Malmer has found what she calls "a more or less complete break of 20–30 years (in) the striking of Swedish pennies" (p. 243). She places this break just around the turn of the 14th century, lasting to "the 1410's or 1420's". This break in the Swedish coining must therefore be contemporary with the first decades of the considerably larger break in the Norwegian coining activity.

¹⁸ H. Holst. Numismatiske kirkefunn i Norge. *NNA* 1953, 1–31, 27.



Map 1. Danish crown bracteates in Norwegian church finds.

Supplies for the coin circulation in Norway then had to be brought in from elsewhere. These early years of the 15th century include the *Danish* coin group most frequently met with in Norwegian church finds, namely the crown bracteates struck c. 1405–20 for Erik of Pomerania (*58).¹⁹ We know 139 crown bracteates from 45 Norwegian church finds. Again, all three main regions have contributed to the material. These coins are quite evenly distributed throughout the country, see Map 1. The largest number of them is from Kaupanger Church (Sogn og Fjordane), at the Sognefjord in western Norway, but the two Nordland churches of Alstahaug and Dønnes present the proportionally largest concentration, 48 and 34 coins respectively. That means that the Danish crown bracteates constitute 17.3 and 15.4 percent of the total amount of the late medieval coins from these two churches. The average figure for all 45 finds in question seems to be slightly above ten percent.

The Danish copper sterlings (*3)²³ from the same period of King Erik's coinage are also known from several Norwegian finds.²⁴ The important thing is that they were circulated in Norway. One could perhaps be tempted to name these ill-famed coins of the joint Scandinavian king in connection with a problematic passage in a diploma issued at Bergen 29 October 1417.²⁵ It contains a receipt by a papal sub-collector to the Stavanger bishop Håkon for a contribution to the Holy See:

— in primis in moneta alterum medium *pund engilsk* videlicet XXX solidi Anglicani, item in moneta Rævelensi XXIII solidi Anglicani item in moneta de Pryscia nouem solidi nouem illos denarios pro solido computando item quatuor solidi in alba moneta Alamanica, et quatuor solidi in parua moneta *Lybiscæ* dicta licet de di[ver]sis item in auro medium *nobill* et unus *kronare* qui et valet medium *nobill* item duo solidi in moneta cuprea Noricana. —

This amount of 3£ 12s. and 1 nobel included 2s. in *moneta cuprea Noricana*, i.e. “Norwegian copper money”. This diploma has been quoted to prove the existence of a Norwegian coinage in the reign of Erik of Pomerania. The Danish copper sterlings of Erik could have provided an expla-

¹⁹ F. Lindahl. Danmarks mønter 1377–1448. *NNÅ* 1955, 73–92, 79 nos. 33–33a. *Galster* 1972, 48 nos. 5–6.

²⁰ Cf. K. Skaare. Myntfunnene. *Kaupanger stavkirke. Fortidsminner LVI*. Oslo 1969, 63–70.

²¹ K. Skaare. Universitetets Myntkabinett, Oslo 1969 *NNÅ* 1970, 245–257, 251–253.

²² K. Skaare. Universitetets Myntkabinett, Oslo 1968. *NNÅ* 1969, 238–251, 248–251.

²³ Lindahl, 80–81 nos. 34–58. *Galster* 1972, 48–50 nos. 7, 10, 14–15.

²⁴ A quick glance through the material gave 18 specimens from 11 different finds, five in Eastern Norway, three in Western Norway, and three in Northern Norway.

²⁵ *DN* II 645.

nation here, had it not been for the fact that the chronology does not allow this conclusion. The copper sterling~~s~~ were not issued until 1422. However, even the crown bracteates, which were issued in the period c. 1405–24, had a very low silver content (from 26.3 till 0.3%). There is a possibility, according to the view of the present writer, that these small and depreciated bracteates could have counted as “moneta cuprea Noricana”.²⁶

The most frequent coin group within the late medieval entry of the Norwegian church finds is the bracteates of the Mecklenburgian bull's head type (cf. *63-*64).

In 1965, Mr. Ola Sæther, who then worked in the Oslo coin cabinet, made a survey of the material that had been discovered and examined up to that time.²⁷ In this paper Sæther could present 471 bull's head bracteates from 26 church finds. Sæther divided his material into 25 varieties, 16 of which (nos. 10–25) he thought had probably been minted in Scandinavia. Sæther here followed up a suggestion put forward, rather carefully, by the late Nils Ludvig Rasmusson in 1937.²⁸ Later on Lars O. Lagerqvist included the Sæther subgroups in his book on Swedish medieval coinage, with Kalmar suggested as their possible mint.²⁹

In 1976, Jørgen Steen Jensen read a paper to the Warsaw/Budapest Symposium on Coin Imitations and Forgeries in Antiquity and Middle Ages. From 132 Danish churches Steen Jensen presented a material of 623 bull's head bracteates, divided into varieties very much in the same way as the Norwegian material of Sæther. Comparing the occurrence of bull's head bracteates and Swedish bracteates in Danish finds, Steen Jensen concluded that the bull's head bracteates were a non-Swedish coin group which had come to Sweden from the west and south and that they must belong to a coin system other than the Swedish system of the 14th century.³¹

In her studies of the Swedish find material, 1189 bull's head bracteates from 64 finds, containing 10,281 medieval coins altogether, Brita Malmer³² found support for the opinion of Steen Jensen.

²⁶ The same expression is used in a document of July 1358, a receipt for tax levied in the Bergen bishopric: –ducentas quindecim marchas cum una ora ad pondus Noricanum ponderatas antique monete cupree Noricane iam diu eciam reprobate et abiecte Gunnars penninger et flosors penninger wlgariter nuncupate–, *DN VIII*, no. 171.

²⁷ O. Sæther. Mecklenburgske øksehodebrakteater i norske kirkefunn. *NNUM* 1965, 175–178.

²⁸ N. L. Rasmusson. Kungl. Myntkabinettet, Stockholm, år 1936. *NNA* 1937, 191–201.

²⁹ Lagerqvist 1970, 96 (*Grupp XXXI*).

³⁰ J. Steen Jensen. Danish finds of bracteates of the so-called Mecklenburg-Scandinavian type. *Proceedings of the International Numismatic Symposium (Warsaw and Budapest 1976)*. Edited by I. Gedai and K. Biró-Sey. Budapest 1980, 143–148, Plate XXVI.

³¹ Jensen, 148

³² B. Malmer. Mecklenburgian bracteates with a bull's head and the monetary history of Sweden. *Numismatica Stockholmensia I*, 1975–1976, 9–12. See also Malmer 1980, 78–80.

Since the studies of Sæther were published sixteen years ago, the Norwegian find material of bull's head bracteates has been more than doubled. The figures found at my last check of our find lists were 948 bull's head bracteates from 56 finds.

These 56 finds contain 13,416 medieval coins altogether, which gives a percentage of 7 (7.06) for the portion of bull's head bracteates. Again, it seems to me more reasonable to compare these bracteates with the late medieval or post-1300 coins. Within that group the bull's head bracteates occupy a position of some 23 percent.

These bracteates occur in finds all over Norway, see Map 2. Eastern Norway has a more numerous (e.g. Hvaler 117, Lom 113) and also a relatively richer representation than western Norway. Northern Norway seems to have been richer in bull's head bracteates than western Norway, and again, the two churches Alstahaug and Dønnes far up on the Nordland coast are noteworthy, with 48 and 24 bull's head bracteates respectively. This reminds us that the distribution of coins also *within* Norway, must, to a large extent, have taken place by sea.

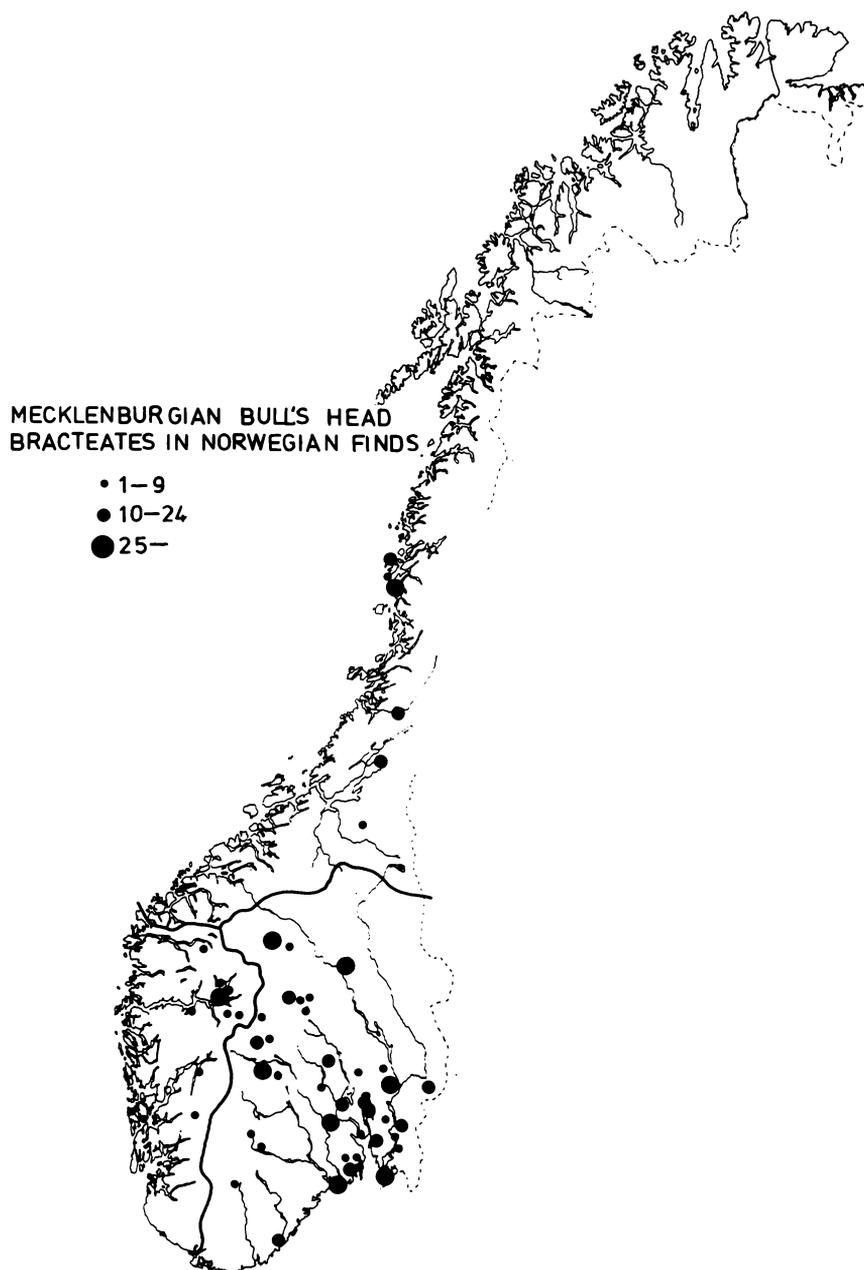
The position of Bergen as a general trade center as well as a center for the trade on northern Norway comes to mind. On the other hand, as I just mentioned, the finds from western Norwegian churches, mostly situated in the inner – or eastern – part of that region, usually have a relatively small number of bull's head bracteates.

The general impression of the distribution of these foreign coin groups in Norwegian finds is a rather mixed and complex one. We do not have the clear tendencies seen in the Danish – and even in the Swedish – material, so as to indicate the direction of the inflow of bull's head bracteates. According to Norwegian finds, bull's head bracteates may or may not have been brought to our country together with Swedish coins. They were certainly not minted in Norway.

It is rather strange that these bull's head bracteates, which played such an important part in the monetary history of Norway and the other Scandinavian countries in this period, are so scarce and so very little known in what is supposed to be their homeland, namely Mecklenburg. You may take this, Mr. Chairman, as a friendly challenge to our German colleagues to offer an explanation – but also as a challenge to ourselves. We must look deeper and more carefully into our material – at least deeper than this speaker has had the opportunity to do in preparing this lecture.

To sum up:

– During the Middle Ages the monetary history of Norway witnessed the change from the old Norse monetary system to the Danish/Lübeck system.



Map 2. Mecklenburg bull's head bracteates in Norwegian church finds.

– In a period of stagnation and decline the monetary circulation within the country, even in the countryside, was kept on a rather high level. This circulation was, to a large extent, carried on by means of coins of non-Norwegian provenance.

– Therefore, during the late Middle Ages, and especially during the century when there was no native coinage, the possible gain from producing the coins circulating in Norway must, to a very large extent, have gone to authorities outside the Kingdom of Norway.

Philip Grierson commented on some aspects of the paper.