Bracteate Inscriptions and Context Analysis in the Light of Alternatives to Hauck’s Iconographic Interpretations

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Abstract
Runic inscriptions on Scandinavian Migration Period gold bracteates have long been considered problematic. Although many of them are readable, only a few are interpretable. One of the major questions about bracteate texts is whether they are related to the images depicted on the pieces. During the past quarter century, these inscriptions have been interpreted chiefly on the basis of Karl Hauck’s identification of the major figure depicted on bracteates as Odin. However, there are other interpretations of the pictures that may also assist our understanding of the texts. This paper examines some of these alternative explanations of bracteate imagery, with particular reference to how the objects were used and by whom, the aim being to arrive at a better understanding of the inscriptions.

Keywords: bracteates, Migration Period, older runic inscriptions, iconography, imagery

Inscriptions are not essential to Scandinavian Migration Period (fifth- and sixth-century) bracteates, yet writing in some form appears on about twenty per cent of these gold pendants, which have been discovered in Scandinavia and throughout northern and central Europe. According to Morten Axboe’s list of December 2010, 1003 bracteates were then known, including 222 with inscriptions from a total of 153 unique dies (2011,


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The texts are mostly written in the older futhark, but sometimes use corrupted or imitation letters based on inscriptions appearing on Late Roman coins and medals, which are presumably the models for the Scandinavian objects. While many of the inscriptions are readable—that is, we can identify individual runes and Roman letters—only a few of them are semantically interpretable. The texts do not serve as necessary captions to the pictures, yet one of the central questions about bracteates is whether the writing is related in some evocative way to the images on the objects. In this paper I discuss various interpretations of pictorial images on bracteates that may contribute to our understanding of the writing on them. After a brief summary of early interpretations of bracteates and their inscriptions, as well as of the basic tenets of Karl Hauck’s iconology, I highlight other (mostly recent) interpretations of bracteate imagery. I examine these new analyses, not to accept them uncritically as definitive explanations of the meaning of the bracteates, but instead to consider whether they may assist our understanding of the inscriptions and the use to which these objects were put.

I advocate that we take into consideration the various contexts in which bracteates have been discovered, in the hope that this will shed additional light upon the meaning of their images and their inscriptions. In addition to drawing attention to a variety of recent iconographic interpretations, I emphasize that not all bracteates were made, used, or deposited in the same way—thus the objects and their inscriptions most probably did not “mean” the same everywhere, and at all times and to all people who encountered them. Before presenting various explanations of bracteate imagery and inscriptions, I review basic information about the objects and their texts.

Bracteate classification and iconography

The nineteenth-century forefathers of bracteate research, including C. J. Thomsen (1855), Oscar Montelius (1869), and Bernhard Salin (1895), focused on classifying these artifacts according to details of the images depicted in the central stamped field. After Thomsen had divided them into Types A–H, Montelius recognized that Types A through D as well

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1 I present this paper largely as it was written in 2010, but have updated the counts to include new discoveries, according to the latest published numbers. Of course, with additional finds the numbers continue to climb. I would like to thank Professor Dr. Klaus Düwel, University of Göttingen, for suggestions of additional works that have been included here.
as Type F date to the Migration Period (fifth and sixth centuries A.D.), whereas the others—Types E, G, and H—are later. In this paper, I will examine only the Migration Period examples, which include Type A with a man’s head, Type B with standing human figures, Type C with a man’s head and a horse-like animal, Type D with a dragon-like animal, and Type F with a horse-like animal but no human. Further refinements to bracteate categories were made by Herje Öberg (1942) and Mogens B. Mackeprang (1952), but the conventional typological classification of bracteates continues to be used, even in the most recent corpus of these objects compiled by Karl Hauck (IK, 1.1–3.2; Heizmann and Axboe 2011). Although there are examples with anomalous imagery that do not easily fit into the established categories, these type-descriptions constitute a general framework that is widely understood and which provides the basis upon which interpretative theories have been launched.

Throughout the history of bracteate research, many suggestions for the identification of pictorial motifs on these artifacts have been advanced. Although several scholars, including Montelius (1900, 76), Salin (1904, 220) and Sune Ambrosiani (1907, 22) realized that Late Roman and Byzantine medallions were the models for bracteates, they focused chiefly on later medieval Eddic and saga texts rather than earlier Roman sources as the key to understanding the pictorial imagery on the objects. Ambrosiani (1907, 39–42) championed the importance of the Emperor cult for the formation of one devoted to Odin, and proposed that bracteate images merge the idea of the emperor as god with the concept of the Germanic deity. Both Jens Jacob Worsaae (1870) and Salin (1895) identified the humanoid figure displayed together with a four-legged, horned animal on Type C bracteates as Thor with his goat, whereas Salin saw this same figure and animal combination, when a bird is included in the scene, as Odin riding his horse Sleipnir. Knut Stjerna (1906) related bracteate imagery to descriptions of the dragon and combat in Beowulf. Worsaae (1870) and Olov Janse (1922, 120) perceived connections to Sigurd the Dragon-Slayer and Attila the Hun. Erik Oxenstierna (1956, 36) identified the picture on a piece from Trollhättan (IK 190) as a representation of the scene described by Snorri Sturluson in his Prose Edda that tells of the Fenris wolf biting off Tyr’s hand, an interpretation that has been accepted by most scholars. Even more recently, researchers, including Heinrich Beck (2001), have continued to turn to Old Norse Eddic and saga sources to interpret tableaus on bracteates. Yet, the extensive scholarship on these objects afforded only a piecemeal interpretation of them until Karl Hauck sought to gather the myriad representations on bracteates into one coherent interpretive system.
For the past forty years, Hauck’s writings have dominated the field of bracteate studies (see the bibliography in Heizmann and Axboe 2011). He uses a method he calls Kontext-Ikonographie, by which he examines the images not in isolation but in conjunction with inscriptions, later texts, place-names, image traditions, archaeology, and motif details such as figure attributes and gestures (Hauck 1975). Hauck (1992, 111–27) identifies the major figure depicted on Migration Period bracteates as Odin and claims that Type C bracteates that show a horse-like animal with a bent leg are the pictorial equivalent of the Old High German second Merseburg charm, a ninth- or tenth-century source that describes how Odin healed the injured hoof of a foal (perhaps Balder’s although he is not named; Hauck 1970). Also central to Hauck’s argument is his proposal that Type C examples show Odin blowing his healing breath into the ear of Balder’s foal (Hauck 1980). Continuing the theme of healing practices, he connects Type B bracteates that exhibit three standing humanoid figures with the death of Balder (Hauck 1998a). He also links the images on a small group of Type F bracteates—which have horse-like animals but no human figures—to his interpretations of Odin on Types A, B, and C (Hauck 1986). While many scholars have taken little notice of the Type D pieces, Hauck (1977) manages to connect the imagery on these, which display animals in an abstracted style but without humans, to the theme of the Midgard Serpent and Ragnarok. Hauck’s efforts to describe a unified system that could explain the pictorial elements on all Migration Period bracteates brings systematization to the interpretation of their images and has also initiated attempts to relate the imagery to the inscriptions they bear.

Bracteate inscriptions and imagery

The number of pages written about bracteate imagery exceeds by far the literature on the texts, yet Klaus Düwel (1992, 34) stresses the importance of the inscriptions by noting that if we disregard all Type D bracteates,² as many as 38.5% of the remaining Migration Period bracteate dies have inscriptions. The letters and runes were an integral part of the die used to stamp multiple one-sided golden disks; thus they contrast with one-of-a-kind incised or engraved inscriptions on fibulae and other portable objects, which could have been made any time after manufacture. The one-sided production technique and the small size of bracteates (typically

² The first Type D bracteate with runes was discovered at Stavnsager near Randers in 2012 (see Imer 2012).
2 to 3 cm in diameter) are important to keep in mind as we consider the complexities involved in reading and transcribing the inscriptions (Wicker 2006, 415). I cannot begin here to summarize the vast literature on runic inscriptions on these pieces; instead I focus on some of the interpretations that relate texts to pictures and thus enlighten us about the use of these artifacts.

The modern study of bracteate texts began with Wolfgang Krause’s (1966, 236–76) division of them into “magic formula” and “runemaster” groups. This still forms the basis of our categorizations, although those in his “magic” group (including ones with the words alu, auja, *ehwaʀ, laukar, and laþu) are now usually referred to as “formula” or “charm” inscriptions. The formula and runemaster texts, along with whole or partial futharks, comprise the majority of bracteate inscriptions. In addition to personal names, formula words, and elements of the futhark, the few (a dozen or so) other semantically interpretable texts have received a great deal of attention.

That bracteates were actually worn as pendant jewellery can be determined from signs of wear on their suspension loops and from their discovery in burials in association with beads found on the deceased’s chest. A few bracteate texts also lend credence to the idea that the objects had an amuletic function; the clearest example is gibu auja, part of the inscription on two die-identical pieces from Køge (IK 98), interpreted by Düwel (2008, 49) as “[ich] gebe Glück (oder: Schutz)” (‘I give luck [or protection]’). This text also fits readily with Hauck’s (1998b) emphasis on the healing function of bracteates. Yet the Køge piece, and several others, raise questions about the use of ‘I’ in inscriptions. We do not know whether ‘I’ refers to (1) the goldsmith who made the object, (2) the person (the so-called runemaster) who designed the written message (who might be the same as the one who made the object itself), (3) one of the figures depicted on the piece, or (4) the object itself. Hauck even proposes (1998c) that some bracteates, including Tjurkö 1 (IK 184), show Odin holding a bracteate; thus, the object is self-referential. There is no consensus, and it is still a question whether names on bracteates are sacred or profane.

Düwel (2008, 47–52) divides Krause’s runemaster group into “divine” and “mortal” subgroups. His interpretations follow Hauck’s iconographic identification, and he regards Odin as the divine runemaster, but he often relegates bracteates that are difficult to interpret according to Hauck’s model to the mortal group. Critical to the discussion about names are the runes on an example from Fyn (IK 58), which have been read as either houar (DR, Text, cols. 522 f.) or horaz (Antonsen 1975, 62; R and Z are
equivalent). Detlev Ellmers (1972) interprets the inscription as ‘the High One,’ a byname of Odin, an identification that becomes a key element in Hauck’s thesis that Type C bracteates depict Odin. He notes that various bynames of Odin appear on bracteates displaying a man with a spear (pp. 225–30). One may ask, then, whether also a bracteate with a spear but lacking runes may represent Odin. In fact, Hauck identifies the figure on all Type C examples, even those lacking a spear and runes, as Odin; thus, the inscription is not essential to his interpretation. Elmer Antonsen (2002, 14) cautioned that nowhere on bracteates or in any other inscriptions in the older futhark is Odin or any other god specifically named. While it can be argued that there may have been an injunction against uttering a god’s name, it is difficult to build an argument about the sacral quality of bracteates on the absence of a name.

A cautious approach to magic interpretations—quite different from Krause’s—is taken by Düwel (1988), who fruitfully investigates incantations and charms in Late Antique papyri for parallels to runic formula words and futhark inscriptions. He examines how the formula words appear in contractions, anagrams, palindromes, and other word-play devices (Düwel 1992, 39). A word that appears frequently on bracteates—and possibly in various abbreviated forms—is laukar ‘leek’, which is examined by Wilhelm Heizmann (1987, 145–53). The plant’s characteristics of protection and fertility are consistent with the theme of healing Balder’s horse on Type C bracteates proposed by Hauck. In addition, the positioning of the inscription laukar along the leg of the horse-like animal (or alternatively by the head of Odin), as on an example from Börringe (IK 26), reinforces the therapeutic power of the plant, according to Düwel and Heizmann (2006, 20). On the Börringe piece, the picture and text are in close contact, but I would counter their seductive proposal by reminding the reader that the laukar texts are simply located on the perimeter of the piece in the same position as Latin inscriptions on the coins and medallions that were the models for bracteates. Düwel and Hauck (2006, 20, 44) also suggest that the futhark is placed adjacent to an area that needs to be cured, usually the animal’s limbs. However, again I would contend that futhark inscriptions that trace the perimeter of bracteates merely imitate numismatic prototypes in their placement and that they do not provide evidence that the inscriptions were intentionally placed next to the body parts. Another more explicit example connecting text and picture is proposed by Ellmers (1972, 233), who links the picture of the horse with the rune e, interpreting it as a Begriffsrune (‘ideograph’) standing for e(hwar) ‘horse’, in the light of the occurrence of forms such as

Futhark 5 (2014)
**ehe, ehar, and ehwu.** This combination of word and image appears on the largest of all bracteates from Åsum (IK 11). Although the idea of one-to-one correspondence between word and image is superficially attractive, it cannot be matched by any other examples. There are, however, other interpretations of inscriptions that are less tied to specific pairings of this kind.

As noted previously, Klaus Düwel (1992) examines Late Antique sources for the use of magic, in an effort to understand how runic words may have been used. He is, however, not the only scholar to turn to late Roman sources for comparative material. Elmar Seebold (1992, 304–07; 1994, 615–18) focuses on how bracteates continue the function of Roman medallions after the latter cease to be available in Scandinavia. He maintains that the early bracteate pictures show the transformation of a specific Roman emperor into an ideal Germanic king rather than a specific leader, and he interprets the inscriptions *alu* and *laphu* as ‘festival’ and ‘invitation’ in the context of gifts from leaders to their followers. While he acknowledges that the king may carry out sacral roles and that some bracteate writings refer to consecration, he minimizes the connection of the objects with the cultic or divine sphere (Seebold 1994, 617 f.). In a later paper (Seebold 1998, 272, 295), he cautions that runes and pictures on bracteates are often freely combined. However, he also thinks that examining inscription and imagery together can be productive, especially in cases where runes and pictures are unclear. Overall, he continues to envisage bracteates as gifts made by a secular leader, following the Roman example. Anders Andrén (1991, 248–52) also refers to the Roman genesis of bracteates to interpret the enigmatic formula words on them. He compares *laphu, laukan,* and *alu* to Latin *dominus,* *pius,* and *felix,* seeing them not as direct translations, but as a transformation of the meanings to elicit similar ideas when they were incorporated into a Germanic world view. The question still remains whether runes and pictures are linked. It is, however, possible that further investigation into the iconography of bracteates may help us interpret not only the imagery but also the inscriptions.

**Alternative interpretations of bracteate iconography**

Karl Hauck’s analysis of bracteates has been widely promulgated and tends to overshadow other suggestions. However, during the past twenty years, several scholars have questioned his iconographic scheme, while others have modified it and called for a multivalent interpretation of bracteate iconography.
Edgar Polomé (1994) was one of the first to challenge openly Hauck’s identification of the unnamed figure on bracteates as Odin. In addition, he demonstrated that Loki’s supposed involvement with Balder’s death was a late development in Nordic mythology, dependent upon contact with Christianity; thus he disputes Hauck’s identification of Balder and Loki on the fifth- and sixth-century *Drei-Götter* bracteates (Polomé 1994, 101 f.). Kathleen Starkey (1999) also casts doubt upon Hauck’s interpretation of the central figure on bracteates as Odin, and she finds Hauck’s designation of Odin as a healing god problematic. She considers many details of Hauck’s iconographic interpretation dubious, questioning why bracteates typically show one bird rather than two, as would be expected if Odin’s two ravens were being portrayed (Starkey 1999, 381 f.). Lotte Hedeager (1997) agrees with Hauck that Odin is represented on these objects, but she interprets them as evidence of Odinic shamanism rather than healing magic seen through the lens of the second Merseburg charm. She proposes that bracteate images depict Odin as a shaman riding to the Other World with his avian helping spirits (even though only one bird is depicted on most bracteates). According to Hedeager (1999), shamanism can be identified generally in animal-style ornament and specifically in bracteate imagery, where ecstasy and a journey to the Other World are represented. None of these challengers to Hauck proposes an alternative interpretation of the iconography that departs from a dependence on Eddic and saga texts.

In contrast, Johan Adetorp (2008) breaks new ground and analyzes bracteates in the context of Celtic sources, both visual and textual. Instead of identifying specific Celtic gods and myths on these objects (Adetorp 2008, 29–32), he attempts to draw from the common background of the Celtic and Germanic worlds, thus looking to earlier material to analyze bracteate imagery instead of examining later Old Norse sources as Hauck and his associates do. The proposal that Celtic and Germanic cultures had much in common is also examined by Peter S. Wells (2001), and Adetorp points out that both cultures focus on the representation of human heads of exaggerated size. He recognizes both fertility and earth symbolism in bracteate imagery and views Type C examples as sun-amulets (Adetorp 2008, 232–34), an explanation already offered by Carl-Axel Moberg (1952) for bracteates with border designs that radiate outward from the center. At times it seems that Adetorp strains to propose something new, anything new, as when he claims that the ears of the riders can also be considered horns (pp. 198–202). It is unfortunate, too, that he makes factual mistakes, such as claiming that some Gotlandic bracteates had
their suspension loops and borders cut off to be used as Charon’s obols (p. 235), whereas in fact these pieces never had such attachments (Lamm and Axboe 1989). Returning to the issue of whether bracteate images are related to their inscriptions, Adetorp admits that an example in a grave may depict an image (not a portrait) of a deceased leader, but he insists that the inscriptions do not name a particular person (pp. 236 f.). In much of his argumentation, Adetorp tries to appeal to scholars of various camps, and his study may open up discussion between Celticists and Germanists.

Other scholars have turned to classical Mediterranean and ancient Near Eastern models for clues to the meaning of bracteate imagery. Anders Kaliff, an archaeologist, and Olof Sundqvist, a historian of religions, trace similarities between the Mithras and Odin cults in bracteate iconography (Kaliff and Sundqvist 2004). They suggest that the Iron Age Scandinavian cult of Odin was affected when it came into contact with the worship of Mithras among Roman soldiers in the Roman provinces. The idea of a relationship between the two is not new, touched upon by Karl Hauck (1970, 302 f.) and examined in more detail by Hilda R. Ellis Davison (1978), but Kaliff and Sundqvist (2004, 23) propose that the Mithras cult was not the impetus for but rather an influence on an already existing Odin cult. They give archaeological and linguistic evidence of connections between Scandinavia and the Roman empire and provinces during the late Roman Iron Age, and they also compare the military brotherhood of the Mithras cult to the context of the worship of Odin. The imagery on Type C bracteates with the large human head looming over a strange horse-like animal with the horns of an ox is interpreted by Kaliff and Sundqvist as a Scandinavian artist’s attempt to convey a three-dimensional image of the Mithraic bull-killing motif with a man standing behind the bull (p. 89). Since members of the Mithras cult left no written evidence — our knowledge of this mystery religion comes from its critics (p. 46) — Kaliff and Sundqvist compare bracteate inscriptions to ritual formulae of the Isis cult and intimate that similar formulae would be typical of Mithraism (pp. 95 f.). Another element of Scandinavian bracteate imagery showing supposed similarities with a distant Near Eastern motif is investigated by Søren Nancke-Krogh (1984). He derives the bird-appendage on the man’s hair (or helmet) found on a small, homogeneous group of Type C examples from a Sassanian model known through Eastern copies of Roman coins and medallions. Although the models may seem remote, in both cases (Mithraic and Sassanian), the possible connections to Nordic bracteates are made more plausible since they were identified via Roman and Roman provincial material.
Another scholar who turns toward Roman sources is Gunilla Åkerström-Hougen (2001, 2010). She examines several bracteate details that she traces to Roman motifs. To begin with, she considers the Roman adventus scene, which shows the arrival of the emperor and is found on coins and medallions (Åkerström-Hougen 2001). She traces the origin of a small number of Type B bracteates (called the Drei-Götter ‘three gods’ group by Hauck) to this Roman numismatic type, also known as “Victory crowning the Victor”. In her later work (2010, 57–74), Åkerström-Hougen explores specific details including the transformation on bracteates of the imperial standard crowned by an eagle into an enigmatic T-shape and a bird depicted in northern animal style. She argues strongly that the scene does not depict the killing of Balder, as Hauck claims. Instead, she notes that the adventus ceremony was familiar in the Roman colonies and was germane to the occasion of giving of medallions and, by extension, bracteates (p. 68). Thus not only the form of the scene but also its meaning was appropriate for the northern objects. Like Kaliff and Sundqvist, she suggests that the large man’s head above the animal on Type C bracteates reflects the northern artist’s lack of familiarity with the Roman manner of depicting deep space on a flat surface (Åkerström-Hougen 2010, 46). Her argument that the “running” man on another group of Type B bracteates stems from classical scenes of hare hunting brings unfamiliar material to light (pp. 39–44), and her suggestion that the dragon-headed banners used as standards in battle served as a model for abstract motifs at the top of some large Type C examples (Åsum, IK 11; Vä, IK 203) fits with the martial character of her interpretation of imperial numismatic iconography (pp. 51–54).

Across the vast Roman Empire and its borderlands, there was a proliferation of various religious systems. Scandinavians serving in the Roman military (Rausing 1987) encountered Sassanian, Mithraic, Celtic, Germanic—and Christian—elements, and cultural diffusionism and syncretism were widespread, so it would not be surprising if bracteates reflected external influences. Adetorp (2008), Kaliff and Sundqvist (2004), and Åkerström-Hougen (2001, 2010) all reject Hauck’s thesis of the predominance of Odin and the story of Balder on bracteates, and they discuss ways in which northern artists responded to and adapted Roman illusionistic depiction. A multivalent view of interpretative possibilities is presented by Alexandra Pesch (2007). As one of Hauck’s students, she accepts his Odin-centered view of bracteates yet proposes a rather postmodern view of contextual meanings, examining alternative understandings of Type C bracteate iconography from the disparate view-
points of Late Antique, Old Norse, Tibetan, and Mithras cultures and religions. Another thread running through several of these hypotheses is the primacy of military iconography, and Andrén’s (1991) discussion of the transformation of auspicious Latin inscriptions (dominus, pius, and felix) into comparable bracteate runic texts (laþu, laukar, and alu) can also be considered in this context. I will now move on to a discussion of the gendering of these objects, which seem to have been made for males in a military context.

Other researchers have turned from the discussion of formal aspects of the depictions to a consideration of who used bracteates and how they were used. Although most bracteate images represent men, the pieces were apparently worn as pendant amulets by women, at least in England and on the Continent where they have been discovered in female graves together with beads and other pendants in situ on the chest (Wicker 2005). Anders Andrén (1991) interprets bracteates as a political medium for a runic-literate elite in Scandinavia and proposes that these objects, found distributed across Europe, were used by women as a sign of Scandinavian identity to cement political alliances. Birgit Arrhenius (1995) suggests that bracteates were morning gifts given by husbands to their brides at the consummation of marriages, and that examples discovered in female burials on the Continent are evidence of exogamy among elites of Germanic Europe. Marta Lindeberg (1997) stresses the role of women not merely as passive participants but as facilitators of alliances and wealth exchange. While linking runic inscriptions on bracteates to figures from Old Norse mythology, she addresses the question of why women would choose to wear these objects depicting males—in particular the male god Odin—by examining Odin’s relevance to women. Märit Gaimster (2001, 144) suggests that the function of bracteates changed as they became associated with women. Although Andrén (1991), Arrhenius (1995), Lindeberg (1997), and Gaimster (2001) consider the gender of the wearers of bracteates, they do not question the identification of the major figure on these pieces as Odin.

Several scholars examine gendered characteristics of Odin and other figures depicted on bracteates, particularly the androgynous role of Odin in the practice of magic. Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson (1998) suggests that women wore bracteates displaying images of Odin because this god crossed genders to participate in the ritual called seiðr, which took him into a shamanic ecstatic state. She also connects women with the Valkyries who serve Odin, suggesting that bracteates were given as gifts at diplomatic ceremonies in which elite women wore these objects marking
their role as hostesses. Gry Wiker (2001) discusses the blurring of borders between male and female and between human and animal in the seiðr ritual as displayed on bracteates and other Iron Age objects. Sébastien Martel (2007) proposes that Type B bracteates displaying a naked, bearded man represent the performance of seiðr, associated not only with Odin in a gender-ambiguous role but also with women and the goddess Freyja. Kent O. Laursen (2006) considers this same group as symbols of an initiation rite signifying the gaining of supernatural knowledge, paying special attention to what he calls extrasomatic symbols located around the figure of the man. Finally, Wiker (2008) suggests that the liminal position of the god Loki in the Drei-Götter group of Type B bracteates is symbolic of warrior initiation, thus placing these pieces within the customary male, military context that has been assumed for bracteate use, such as the Mithraic brotherhood that Kaliff and Sundqvist (2004) propose.

Even supposedly new approaches to the study of bracteates are often constrained by the conventional parameters of past research, which may act as a stranglehold on creative interpretations. Through mechanisms of contextual, shifting constructions of gender that we do not yet comprehend, medallions that had presumably been worn by men were transformed into bracteates worn by women (Wicker 2008, 245), and some of these objects may have been gendered “female” while others remained “male”. An elite Germanic woman could wear a gold bracteate that had an apparently masculine inscription and featured masculine imagery, presumably to express descent and political affinity, as Svante Fischer (2003) has proposed for Alemannic women. How this could happen is something that deserves more research and a new approach, namely context analysis.

**Context analysis of bracteates**

Bracteate images are highly stylized and simplified (not the least because of their small size), and their texts are enigmatic; further analysis following Hauck’s model is unlikely to result in significant advances in our understanding. To resolve this impasse, I propose that we employ context analysis, a methodology that Michaela Helmbrecht (2008) uses productively to investigate depictions of supposed horned helmets in early medieval Scandinavian art. This method differs from Hauck’s *Kontext-Ikonographie* (Hauck 1975), even though superficially the two approaches sound similar. Hauck brings a multidisciplinary approach to the study of bracteates, marshaling a diverse team of experts to examine every detail within an allegedly coherent system that is foisted externally upon these
objects from an (in anthropological terms) ethic perspective. Context analysis, on the other hand, emphasizes how images (and inscriptions) may have been used differently by diverse social groups from an emic or internal point of view within the culture. Kathryn Starkey (1999), who questions Hauck’s interpretation, calls for research on why the objects were made in place of the focus on identifying the figures depicted on them. Michael Enright in his review of the first volumes of Hauck’s corpus of bracteates asks (1988, 504):

Might not some consideration be given to the social as well as to the religious reasons for wearing bracteates? … an amulet not only says something about the religious beliefs of the wearer but may also say something noteworthy about social status and concepts of aristocratic display. It is an intriguing datum that many if not most of the wearers for the golden amulets appear to have been women. Why?

Hauck focuses on the religious meaning of bracteates and their texts, but these objects can have multiple meanings if we consider the various reasons why people might have worn them across the broad ranges of place and time in which they are found.

Elsewhere I have proposed that not all bracteates were made by the same methods (Wicker 1998, 2006); similarly, it is unlikely all were used in the same way. Thus we cannot assume that a “one-size-fits-all” approach to iconography and inscriptions is appropriate. Rather than seeking constantly to identify mythological figures on the objects, we should try to understand the particular functions and meanings bracteates had for different groups of people, taking into consideration how and where these objects were deposited. Bracteates found in hoards in the heartland of southern Scandinavia may have been used differently from examples discovered in women’s graves in far-away England and on the Continent. It is also likely that bracteates were made, used, and cherished by individuals with varying levels of literacy, both active and passive. Examples sporting different inscriptions may have been used in a range of ways and by various subsets of the population. Bracteates held multiple meanings for those who wore them, not only religious but also social as carriers of high status and markers of age and gender.

Since there are regional variations of favored motifs, with some being used for only a short period of time, others for much longer, we can imagine that meanings changed over time. As Helmbrecht (2008, 33) points out “pictorial representations in oral societies are a special form of tradition, which should not be considered as a passive corpus of illu-
trations referring to knowledge and ideas already fixed in written form”. Scandinavian paganism was not an organized, orthodox, dogmatic reli-
gion, not the unified “package” that Hauck built up based on Odin, Balder, and ideas of healing. Hauck’s unified scheme of bracteate iconography is enticing, but I do not believe it can explain the use of images and inscriptions in the Migration Period. Just as bracteates reflect regional varieties of imagery and regional variation in technical details, so also they reflect a mosaic of beliefs and uses as expressed in pictures and words. As Lisbeth Imer (2007, 81) has argued, early runic writing both contrasts with the Roman world and imitates it. So, too, bracteates were conceived within a milieu of syncretic Roman inspiration and reflect that background.

Karl Hauck opened up the field of bracteate studies by gathering a multidisciplinary group of scholars who continue his studies and carry them forward as they examine iconography, inscriptions, “central places”, and other topics. However, the research that I draw attention to here reflects dissatisfaction with his theories and an interest in looking towards other possibilities. When interpretations of inscriptions are based on the assumption that Odin and Balder are the figures depicted on bracteates, then all readings lead to a circumscribed range of possibilities. That is to say: if we have preconceived notions, we tend to force texts to fit with what we expect or hope to find. An openness towards new approaches does not mean uncritically accepting all suggestions; and not all interpretations of bracteate iconography and inscriptions are equally viable. But we need the courage and imagination to step outside the bounds of what has previously been proposed. For us to have any possibility of understanding runic inscriptions on bracteates, we must consider the objects in context: how they were made and used, and by whom.

Bibliography


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IK + number = bracteate published in IK or in Morten Axboe, “Katalogbeschreibung der Neufunde”, in Heizmann and Axboe 2011 [= IK, 4.3], 891–999 and plates 1–102.


