
Gold foil figures in focus

A Scandinavian find group and related objects and images from
ancient and medieval Europe

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Gold foil figures in focus

A Scandinavian find group and related objects and images from
ancient and medieval Europe

Edited by
Alexandra Pesch and Michaela Helmbrecht

Advanced studies in ancient iconography I

Papers from an international and interdisciplinary workshop organized by the
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Table of Contents

Foreword	7
Preface	9
Alexandra Pesch, Michaela Helmbrecht Setting the stage.....	11
Margrethe Watt Gold foil figures – fact and fiction?.....	35
Scandinavian imagery	
Siv Kristoffersen Gestural expressions in Norwegian Style I	73
Bente Magnus Human images in the art of Scandinavia, 4 th –6 th centuries AD. A stylised abstraction of the human form in ritual disguise	83
Torun Zachrisson Scandinavian figurines – relatives of the gold foil figures, and a new find from Old Uppsala ..	105
Michaela Helmbrecht The gold foil figures within the imagery of the Vendel Period and the continuation of their motifs into the Viking Age	131
Other imageries and image aspects	
Charlotte Behr Framing matters	151
Sonja Marzinzik From Rome to the Viking Period: an overview of anthropomorphic imagery from the British Isles	171
Jennifer M. Bagley Menschenbilder der Kelten – Anthropomorphe Darstellungen der Eisenzeit in Mittel- und Westeuropa.....	205
Manuel Flecker Anmerkungen zum Verhältnis der skandinavischen Goldblechfiguren zur Kunst der Römischen Kaiserzeit.....	229

Yvonne Petrina	
Gold, Geld, Glaube – Frühbyzantinische Goldobjekte und deren figürliche Darstellungen . . .	239
Kyrylo Myzgin	
Late Roman Period gold foil pendants stamped with anthropomorphic and zoomorphic ornaments found in the Barbaricum	255
Axel Christoph Gampp	
Fingerspiele – (Mittelalterliche) Gesten und Goldblechfiguren	279
A world of warriors?	
Michaela Helmbrecht	
Continental figural repoussé works of the Merovingian Period	291
Egon Wamers	
Kaftan, Straffhaar und Stab. Ein Goldblechfiguren-Motiv und die Bilderwelt Europas im 6.–9. Jahrhundert	313
Svante Fischer	
Images of Roman and Byzantine imperial dress – inspiration for the Scandinavian gold foil figures?	339
Research history and special questions	
Olof Sundqvist	
Communicating with the gods via humanoid images – the meaning and function of the gold foil figures with pairs in the view of history of religions	359
Sigmund Oehrl	
Karl Haucks Studien zu den skandinavischen Goldblechfiguren – Zusammenfassung, Kritik und neue Überlegungen	389
Gold foil figures in focus: results of workshop I	
Alexandra Pesch, Michaela Helmbrecht	
Gold foil figures in focus: synthesis and results	427

Gold foil figures in focus: synthesis and results

Alexandra Pesch, Michaela Helmbrecht

Keywords: Figural art, iconography, methodology, Migration Period, Merovingian Period, archaeology, embossing technique, gender, votive offerings

Abstract: The most important aspect of the gold foil figures is their iconography. That is why the main objective of the workshop in Schleswig was to find answers to the following questions: do the gold foil figures' iconographical roots lie mainly in earlier Scandinavian imagery (and society/religion), or were they triggered and/or affected by foreign influences? Whatever the answers are, they surely will offer clues regarding the meaning and significance of the pieces and their general interpretation. Through the workshop's lectures and especially the discussions among the scholars from different fields of research, many aspects regarding the tiny foils were brought together and re-assessed. Further, intriguing thoughts as well as some surprising answers to the main questions (and some other questions as well) emerged. The overall results concerning imagery, material, political and religious relevance, use, and function are summarised in this chapter.

At present about 50 find spots with gold foil figures have been recorded, all but one located in Scandinavia. The total number of these places is not easy to determine, due to the lack of information about finds from as long ago as the 18th century, unprovenanced specimens in private collections, and other uncertainties. Nevertheless, it is possible to list 21 find spots in Sweden, including famous sites like Helgö, Uppåkra, and Västra Vång, about 20 places in Denmark, among them Sorte Muld on Bornholm and Gudme and Lundeberg on Fyn, and about nine in Norway, such as Borg on Lofoten, Mære in Trøndelag, and Hauge on the Tu hill in Rogaland, as well as, allegedly, one site in northern Germany, “near Schleswig” (cf. WATT in this vol., with Tab. 1). Most of these places are settlement sites, but some specimens are reported to have been found in grave mounds and other settings, too. Because of their miniature size and extremely low weight, the gold foil figures were practically untraceable for standard metal detectors up to the second decade of the 21st century. Thus, the majority of these artefacts known today come from archaeological investigations.

The first monograph on gold foil figures was published as early as 1725 by Jacob VON MELLE (MELLE 1725), one of the lesser-known German polymaths. With VON MELLE's drawings of 20 examples from Bornholm and his suggestions regarding the interpretation of their images as depicting gods and goddesses, the gold foil figures (by VON MELLE called *simulacra aurea* in Latin) entered the stage of scholarly research. From then onwards, they played an albeit marginal role in archaeological literature. This is not the place to give an overview of the research history (cf. the first section of BEHR, and the overview by WATT, both this vol.), but one year should be mentioned: since 1985, the publication rate has increased considerably, when an incredibly large number of gold foil figures was found in eastern Bornholm. Between 1985 and 1987, about 2.300 specimens have been discovered in

one particular area, the fields of Sorte Muld, a Migration/Vendel Period central place, and that number has since grown to more than 2.700 pieces. Already in her first publications of these finds, the excavator Margrethe Watt raised many relevant questions (see WATT 1986; 1992; 1999a; and *passim*). Much has been written since, focusing on the gold foil figures' function, that is, their role in the religious and social life of the communities in which they were used, and especially on the significance of their imagery. However, there are several different directions in research and no scholarly agreements on many of the main problems have yet been achieved. Many questions are still unresolved.

Nevertheless, throughout the workshop's lectures and especially the discussions during the meeting which often went far beyond the primarily debated topics (for the workshop's design in detail, see chapter SETTING THE STAGE), the scholars from various fields of research developed some surprisingly clear answers to at least some research questions. This chapter summarises and assesses the main results.

NOMENCLATURE

To begin with, some aspects of nomenclature need to be mentioned. While the English term "gold foil figures" is widely accepted and neutral in its implication, there are different terms and spellings in other languages. Most common are designations close to "guldgubber" or simply "gubber" (WATT 1999a), which are derived from the Scandinavian languages: Swedish "guldgubbe" (plural "guldgubbar"), Danish singular also "guldgubbe", but plural "guldgubber", and Norwegian "gullgubbe" (plural "gullgubber"). This is an historical determination for the foils – in fact, the first known one – dating to the 18th century. Used by fishermen in Ravlunda, southeastern Scania (Sweden), for the tiny items they found on their beach, the term was adopted and introduced into scholarship by Nils Henrik Sjöborg in 1791 (see LAMM 2004, 60; WATT in this vol.). Literally, "guldgubbe" means "old man of gold".

Although the Scandinavian names for the gold foil figures sound nice and catchy, they are problematic when it comes to a scientifically satisfying description. The designation "gubbe" conveys notions of maleness. This is clearly not appropriate when talking about the gold foil figures in general, because many of them depict females, be it as single figures or as part of the couple versions. The term "gubbar"/"gubber" thus renders the females invisible.

Moreover, especially in German research, where the Scandinavian term has established itself with surprising ease, it creates linguistic confusion, as problems with the grammatical gender and singular/plural forms are frequent: expressions like "die/eine Gubbe" as a female noun and "der Gubber" (masculine singular, but with wrong plural ending) abound, as do "die Gubben"¹ and "die Gubber" in the plural, and for the dative plural case, the construction "den Gubern" can be found in literature, thus all attesting to the difficulties in adopting the foreign term. The most common designations today are "Goldblechfigürchen" (HAUCK 1976, 579; 1998), "Goldfolien" (HAUCK 1993), and "Goldblechfiguren" (WATT 1992; HELMBRECHT 2011, 258), but also other neologisms are in use, like "Goldmännchen", "Goldblattfiguren", "Goldplättchen", and even more experimental – and not quite seriously – terms like "Goldgreise".

The English terminology appears to be much more consistent, using almost exclusively "gold foil figures". In the summary of his bracteate catalogue, Mogens MACKEPRANG (1952, 228) translated the Swedish term "guldgubbar" quite literally as "gold fogeys" (cf. German "Goldgreise"), but this seems to have had no further impact on the English nomenclature.

1 Presumably, it was MACKEPRANG (1935) who introduced the term into German, using "Goldgubben" for the plural form; see also BRØNDSTED 1969, 315.

Technically, there is a difference between “foil” (German “Folie”) and “sheet metal” (German “Blech”), the former being thinner (less than 60 µm = 0.06 mm). This distinction means that the majority of the gold “foil” figures actually is situated somewhere in a grey area between “sheet” and “foil”, and that on its own either term is inadequate to describe all of them. But as the objects usually are very fragile and delicate, “foil” appears to be the better term in general.

It is obvious that there is also a difference between the gold foil figures and some slightly bigger figurines, which are made of gold strips or cut out of thick sheet gold. The latter also have a rather more three-dimensional appearance than the former. In the literature, the terms “gubbe” and “gold foil figure” are often used for both types. Margrethe Watt proposed to talk about “gold foil figures” only when the gold is less than 1 mm (= 0.04 inches) thick (see WATT in this vol.). But the distinction remains difficult. Some of the three-dimensional figures have been found at the same sites as gold foil figures (e.g. in Guldhullet, Bornholm), and appear to have been used in a similar way as and even side by side with them.² That is why a rather humorous new overall term – to be taken with a pinch of salt – has been proposed to cover all of them: “gold foil follies”.

In this book, we have chosen to keep the terminology consistent and have abandoned “gubber” in favour of “gold foil figures” and “Goldblechfiguren”.

GOLD: AN EXCEPTIONAL MATERIAL

The vast majority of the gold foil figures are made of pure gold, with just a few exceptions made of gilded silver (WATT in this vol.).³ Therefore, we may assume that the material played a crucial role and was not chosen randomly: otherwise, many more specimens made of silver or even of copper alloy would have been produced (Torun ZACHRISSON, in discussion).

In the ancient societies and in Byzantium, gold was not only a marker of prosperity and power (HARDT 2004; MATTERN 2019), but also a symbol of light and divinity (Ute VERSTEGEN, in discussion). There are a lot of indications for the special role that gold played in the imagination and beliefs of ancient cultures all over the world (PETRINA in this vol.; JANES 1998; WAMERS 2005; BEHR 2012; HARDT/HEINRICH-TAMASKA 2013; MEIER-STAUACH 2014). Gold was the preferred material to establish communication with the other world (ZACHRISSON, in discussion). Additionally, there are many beliefs in the “seeding” of gold in order to sanctify the land or to ensure a good harvest (Wilhelm HEIZMANN, in discussion). Gold even was used as an efficacious remedy for sicknesses and evil. Similar concepts existed in Germanic mythology and society (HELMBRECHT 2011, 270–271; SAHM et al. 2019).

The late Roman Iron Age and the Migration Period in northern Europe are quite rightly called a “golden age”: huge amounts of gold came to the North (MAGNUS 2001; CAPELLE 2001, 137), originating from soldiers’ pay, tributes, or booty. It was buried in the ground and today is known from archaeological finds. Especially Roman coins (solidi) were used as raw material for the production of Germanic precious objects (e.g. bracteates). Artefacts made of other valuable metal, such as the eccentric silver brooches (see KRISTOFFERSEN in this vol.), were always gilded, as the play of light and shadow was important (Siv KRISTOFFERSEN, in discussion). Shiny gold dominated the material culture of the elites. But in the middle of the 6th century, gold suddenly became rare in the North, probably due to climatic crises and political changes, such as the fall of the Western Roman Empire (see below, sub-chapter MASTERS AND USERS: A NEW SOCIAL ORDER). This is clearly visible in the archaeological record. Gold was still regarded as essential for the fabrication of certain images, but the amount of gold

2 However, there is one interesting difference: the figurines do not come as couple versions.

3 Some pendants resembling gold foil figures and their dies are made of copper alloy. There is evidence for some debased foil figures which were given golden surfaces by depletion gilding (Margrethe Watt).

used for the manufacture of any individual object was significantly reduced. Thus, more items could be made out of the same quantity of raw material; the usage of the expensive gold was minimised, whilst its positive effects could work all the same. The tiny and thin gold foil figures are possibly evidence of such attempts: they appeared shiny and precious, but their individual material value actually was very much lower than that of a gold bracteate, for example.

However, even if the material value of a single specimen of the gold foil figures was insignificant, it could have been valuable and “expensive” for the customers and users who cherished it: we do not know the “retail price”, if there was one at all, for one or several gold foil figures resp. for a batch of them.

MASS PRODUCTION VERSUS INDIVIDUALISATION

Stamped gold foil figures were made with *patrix* (‘male’) dies (see WATT in this vol., Fig. 4). The technique of stamping made it possible to produce many specimens in large series, simply by using the same die over and over again. The large numbers of die-identical gold foils that have been found in several places show that they have been made not as individual pieces but as mass-produced objects.

Instantly striking is the regularity of the gold foil figures’ overall design: it is limited in both size (about 7–20 mm) and shape (rectangular, sometimes with an arched upper end, but never round, oval, triangular, trapezoid, star-shaped or such). Most hand-cut and engraved figures, too, seem to follow this system, albeit their shape is sometimes more irregular. Thus, whilst the gold foil figures at first glance seem to be characterised by a great diversity of motifs and shapes, a certain standardisation of them quickly becomes apparent. There are basically just three main motif variants of the stylised figures, which are a) a single female, b) a single male, c) a couple of a female and a male. Other motifs are extremely rare, albeit couples of male/male (e.g. from Lundeborg and Slöinge) and female/female (pendant from Norsborg) do occur as well as figures with the shape of quadruped animals (only from Bornholm), but these appear to be exceptions from the rule. Many gold foil figures, though, cannot be sexed, either because of a conscious decision by the designer not to indicate the gender of the persons depicted, or because any gender characteristics are not recognisable as such any more. Within the three main groups, there is some diversity. Figures are represented either in profile or, less frequently, *en face*, they are shown with hair, clothes, accessories, and objects or instead naked without any further details. Generally, however, they are lacking variety and individuality, and all appear to conform to a very small number of prototypes. Beyond that, most of the dies can be recognised as members of closely related motif groups, thus reducing the variety of images even more. Margrethe Watt has defined such “die families” (WATT in this vol.), in order to use them as a basis for the analysis of the gold foil figures’ significance and the study of their motifs.⁴

The uniformity of the foils’ appearance might suggest that they were made and used by a very small number of people (Axel Chr. GAMPP, in discussion). However, the wide spatial distribution and the huge numbers of specimens from different sites may indicate a larger audience. Here it might again be helpful to look at the gold bracteates and their standardised motif groups. Most of them appear in wide areas throughout the North and in Britain as well as in other regions, implying at the likelihood that many people were involved in the processes of production and distribution (HEIZMANN, in discussion). It remains unclear, however, who would in fact have been able to read the images, to understand their precise meaning, and finally to use the pieces actively. It is quite possible that this

4 Such a standardisation of imagery is not a new phenomenon in the North. The earlier Migration Period gold bracteates too can be classified in groups or families by their motifs (“Formularfamilien”), however, the iconographic variations are much larger than those of the gold foil figures, PESCH 2007.

ability was limited to a small circle of persons (Morten AXBOE and Sonja MARZINZIK, in discussion) and/or that only few people, as representatives of larger groups, ever were allowed to see the gold foil figures at close range – for example in a capacity as cult specialists.

This raises the question whether figures produced in large numbers were in fact meant to be employed in batch quantities, or rather were intended to be used individually by individuals. In some cases, gold foil figures show evidence of deliberate manipulation: for instance, some were dented, perforated or scratched, others were folded. These foils may have been treated as special and their uses differed from the majority. This also applies to those figures, which were made as individual pieces, cut out of gold foil or small strips of metal. In conclusion, it seems that at least some of the gold foil figures were handled by more than one person.

For the majority of the foils, however, the fact that they generally are rather too small and delicate to handle and thus to be used for any practical purposes, suggests that a usage in bulk would be the most reasonable conclusion. The huge number of finds from some settlement areas, especially from Sorte Muld, provides the archaeological evidence. Only in large numbers the gold foil figures seem to have been meaningful.

THE NORTHERN WAY OF IMAGERY

An important point regarding the gold foil figures is that they serve no other purpose than to bear – or rather, to *be* – the image. Helmets and other items of everyday use may or may not have borne images, but there is no gold foil figure without an image. During the workshop, it became obvious that the gold foil figures are deeply rooted in Germanic art of the first millennium AD. They share many characteristics with anthropomorphic figures on embossed foils (*repoussé*) from the Migration Period, for example on gold bracteates, brooches, sword mounts, or vessel fittings (see MAGNUS and KRISTOFFERSEN in this vol.) as well as on small figurines (see ZACHRISSON in this vol.) and contemporary objects of the Vendel Period (HELMBRECHT, Vendel Period, in this vol.). Although the slightly older embossed figures of the Migration Period are not of exactly the same appearances because of differences in body postures, attributes, and clothing, many individual elements of the shapes and the variety of motifs are well established, such as the design of human eyes, noses, hair, hands (often with just four or even fewer fingers), and feet as well as the proportions of the body with the comparatively big heads. Another characteristic feature is the jutting chin of many human faces shown in profile, known for example on gold bracteates, embossed fittings, and from many figurines. A large straight nose, which links directly to the upper forehead, can be seen in many images, whether on gold foil figures, bracteates, or other embossed anthropomorphic heads.⁵ From the variety of body postures, one was investigated in detail at the workshop: the open hand held in front of the head of the figure, sometimes with the thumb near or inside the mouth.⁶ Another posture, featuring a standing figure with one hand raised and the other lying flat on the stomach or with both hands on the belly, is also common in both periods. Long-lasting traditions with the continuity of standardised, highly specific stylised forms are apparent in the design of figural art from the Migration Period to the time of the gold foil figures and into the Viking Age. The complete absence of some artistic motifs during the entire period – for example buildings, landscapes, or furniture –, which are common elements, for example, in ancient or early Christian art, is another feature of that tradition.

5 See the examples in WATT in this vol., Figs. 7; 24; 27; WAMERS in this vol., Figs. 1,1–8; KRISTOFFERSEN in this vol., Fig. 1; MAGNUS in this vol., Figs. 16; 18–19.

6 WATT in this vol., Fig. 29; KRISTOFFERSEN in this vol., Fig. 1; cf. WAMERS in this vol., Fig. 14; see also PESCH 2017.

Germanic art is non-naturalistic. Whilst many of the motifs were adopted from Roman images that were known in the North, for example from coins and statuettes, these models instantly were adapted and redesigned according to indigenous needs and likings. The result was a highly stylised imagery with its own guidelines and manufacturing criteria. From the beginning, two separate sections developed: firstly, the so-called “animal styles” (SALIN 1904), featuring animals and mythical creatures as main elements, and secondly, an art form with predominantly anthropomorphic figures (see KRISTOFFERSEN in this vol.). Whilst the animals in the images developed into more and more stylised and interwoven features and thus became very complicated to ‘read’, the anthropomorphic figures continued to be more easily recognisable, even if their stylisation also followed some of the same fundamental rules that governed those of the animal styles. Sometimes both styles are combined on the same object, for example on a helmet or a gold bracteate. The gold foil figures, however, are never decorated in animal style. They also never feature runic inscriptions or additional characters or symbols (like triskelion, swastika, looped square, triquetra), as can be found on the gold bracteates (for that, see BEHR/HEIZMANN 2005).⁷ Thus, the images on the tiny foils differ from both the older embossed images and the design of the contemporary helmets (see HELMBRECHT, Vendel Period, in this vol.).

A typical feature of Germanic art is miniaturisation (PESCH 2015, 508–509; cf. BACK DANIELSSON 2007, 170–241), the tendency to depict both anthropomorphic and animal figures in diminutive sizes. The small depictions on the central field of gold bracteates and the images on brooches, sword mounts, belt fittings, and other items are so tiny that it is nearly impossible to recognise them from a distance. In such an environment the small size of the gold foil figures does not come as a surprise.

Another general characteristic are the variations in the details of specific motifs and graphic elements as observed particularly on the gold bracteates: many of their motifs have been classified into groups called “design families” (PESCH 2002, 56–65; 2007). The members of such a design family are defined by the many shared traits of their images, concerning both motif and particular stylistic features. They were not stamped with the same die, but with different dies; still motifs and stylistic features were very similar. The most important point here is that they show details so alike that they cannot have been designed independently, but must go back to a common template. Thus, the design families can be seen as groups of bracteates that share many features with just small differences in details of motif and style. The same phenomenon can be observed on the gold foil figures. Many of them come in groups of closely related motifs with a pool of shared details. Margrethe Watt has defined and published several of such groups, for example her “princely group” (WATT 1992; cf. WATT in this vol. with Fig. 7; WAMERS in this vol., Fig. 1). The naming of these groups has changed throughout research history, but today “die families” is the prevailing term (see WATT in this vol.; cf. WATT 1992, with the term “Fürstengruppe”; 1999c, 177: “strings of die copies”; 2004, 173: “die family”). With a comparatively large number of related specimens from one or more find spots, the overall production of gold foil figures alternates somewhere between standardisation and variation, just like the production of gold bracteates.

The striking similarities between motif details from embossed sheets on Vendel Period helmet panels from the grave fields of Vendel and Valsgärde in Sweden on the one hand and some of the motifs on gold foil figures on the other have been noticed earlier (WATT 1986, 75–76; HELMBRECHT, Vendel Period, in this vol., with references; WAMERS 2018). These similarities might be interpreted as evidence for the degree to which the gold foil figures were rooted in the characteristic Northern art and its styles. However, similar motif panels from helmets and other weaponry were found in other

7 In very rare cases circle-like ornaments, half-circles or dots occur on top of couple versions, see e.g. the specimens from Helgö 255, 737, 1860, 2593, and 4010: LAMM 2004, 78; 80; 83–84.

parts of Europe as well, in Britain and on the Continent (cf. HELMBRECHT, Continent, MARZINZIK and WAMERS, all this vol.). This is remarkable, because it confirms far-reaching connections of the people who crafted and used those related motifs (see below, sub-chapter MASTERS AND USERS: A NEW SOCIAL ORDER). Thus, the iconography of the gold foil figures, which to date have exclusively been found in Scandinavia, should be considered in a wider, supra-regional setting. The anthropomorphic figures of both helmet panels and gold foil figures are stylised in the same way, regarding proportions and posture, and the execution of elements such as heads, hairstyles, hands, or shoes, for example, is very much alike. Especially a certain kind of dress, an open coat worn by the warriors depicted on the helmets commonly called a “kaftan”, is a strong connecting detail between the two categories (WAMERS in this vol.).⁸ The images on the famous Torslunda dies (for the manufacturing of embossed sheets) from Öland also share the same feature. It can be assumed that it is the same social group that is depicted on these two object types, yet with some differences: on the helmets and Torslunda dies, only male figures are shown, performing actions of combat and war. As horsemen and foot warriors, they often wear helmets (with horns or animal masks) and weapons such as swords, spears, and shields. In contrast, the gold foil figures do not portray any fighting scenes: weapons are extremely rare in their imagery to begin with,⁹ and never do they include the remarkable horned helmets that feature so prominently on the Swedish panels (for those, see HELMBRECHT 2007–2008; 2011, 140–146) and are associated with fighting and rituals connected to combat. A very small number of gold foil figures, all of them from Sorte Muld, are shaped like animals (boars?), but none of the foils shows animals together with anthropomorphic figures, as it can be seen on the helmet panels. The greatest difference may be discerned in the images of women on a large number of gold foil figures, both singly and in the couple (female/male) versions. To conclude, the imagery of the gold foil figures was obviously derived from a more peaceful setting than that of the helmets. Its range of expression, however, was also strictly limited by the restricted diversity of the motifs (cf. above).

Considering this very special Northern way of creating figural art, the images of the gold foil figures prove to be – in size, fabrication, style, and motifs – a home-grown, indigenous phenomenon of the North. The absence of both animal art (style II) and runic inscriptions on the gold foil figures is noticeable, since these could be expected. Moreover, the tiny foils are not direct derivatives or enhancements of other objects from slightly earlier times, such as the gold bracteates. With the end of the Migration Period in the second half of the 6th century, a general change in the material culture is noticeable (see below). New object types and motifs emerge at that time. The gold foil figures are an important part of this modified visual culture. Therefore, questions arise about possible foreign influences that may have triggered the invention of the gold foil figures.

SOURCES OF INSPIRATION AND PARALLELS FROM OTHER CULTURES

Ancient and Christian cultures in Europe predating or being contemporary with the gold foil figures, provide a lot of material that has been compared to the tiny foils. As their emergence has always been understood as an indication of some kind of change in religion and ritual, there might have been external stimuli that prompted the invention, design, and usage of the tiny metal foils. If specific foreign influences could be identified, that is, if concrete details were recognised as adoptions from

8 The kaftan is a coat customarily worn in Asia. For more about this point, see below in sub-chapter SOURCES OF INSPIRATION AND PARALLELS FROM OTHER CULTURES, section *Figural motifs*.

9 One sword is known from Sorte Muld (see HELMBRECHT, Vendel Period, in this vol., Fig. 26) and presumably some daggers from Uppåkra and Sorte Muld (see WATT 2004, 172). Daggers, however, are not primarily combat weapons, but might have been used in rituals, e.g. for carving the meat of sacrificial animals.

other cultures, the interpretation of at least some of the pictorial elements of the gold foil figures and their overall function may receive some helpful clues.

Generally, adoptions would not come as a surprise: during the Iron Age and especially in the Migration Period, Germanic art seems to have been a truly synthetic phenomenon (PESCH 2012, 687), that used several types of objects as models, particularly from Imperial Roman and Early Byzantine imagery, and developed them into the characteristic animal styles and specific figural art of the North (see KRISTOFFERSEN, MAGNUS, and ZACHRISSON, all in this vol.). A related issue is whether such a transfer can be interpreted as a merely artistic synthesis or rather as evidence for some foreign political influence or some kind of religious mission (cf. PESCH 2003, 120; WATT 2015; see also FABECH 1991; 1994; HULTGÅRD 2003; PADBERG 2011).

During the workshop, the specialists each examined their respective material, evaluating pictorial features (e.g. motifs, details, variations, framing) and other characteristics (e.g. shape, usage, tininess) as well as technical aspects such as sheet metal and embossing technique (*repoussé*), in order to either detect or reject possible models for and parallels to the gold foil figures.

Gold foil/sheet metal

Metal sheet or foil has been produced in many different ancient cultures. Using foil or sheet metal is a way of working precious material, while minimising its consumption and wastage. As an additional benefit, foils can easily be decorated with (figural) ornamentation by stamping and embossing. The products, however, were very fragile, and as a rule, they were used as parts of composite objects, either affixed to the surface of supporting mounts, or at least framed with gold wires – unlike votive plaques, which were not handled in everyday life and practice, but in religious contexts.

Roman votive plaques have been discussed as possible archetypes/sources of inspiration of the gold foil figures from an early date, as noticed by Karl Hauck (cf. OEHL in this vol.; HAUCK 1998, 318). In the Roman world, offering rituals frequently were conducted using objects made of thin embossed and/or cut sheet metal (see FLECKER in this vol.; MARZINZIK in this vol., Figs. 1–2; PETRINA in this vol., with Fig. 7). Could the idea of using sheet metal in sanctuaries have been transferred to the Germanic areas during the Roman Iron Age? Since many Germanic art phenomena are modelled on Roman objects and images, this would hardly be surprising. However, the majority of these finds is not contemporary with the gold foil figures, but considerably older. What is more, about 80 % of the Roman votive plaques are made of silver, not gold, and they are slightly thicker and usually much larger than the tiny gold foils of the North. This is also true for Celtic and Etruscan votive plaques (BAGLEY in this vol.). Hence, a direct adoption is not apparent.

Especially interesting as parallel phenomena are the gold foil crosses of the 6th to 8th centuries, which are thus roughly contemporaneous with the gold foil figures (see HELMBRECHT, Continent, in this vol.; TERP-SCHUNTER 2017). In southern Germany and Italy, these gold foil crosses were obviously made for and used in funerary contexts. The purpose of using thin foil surely lay in saving on the precious material, which became a rare commodity after the fall of the Roman Empire. However, the gold foil crosses from Italy, southern Germany, and the neighbouring areas were larger than the gold foils of the North. Their purpose was clear: they were used in burial rites, sewed onto the dead person's clothing or shroud, or at least deposited in the grave, in order to help the deceased to enter the afterlife. It seems that they were made exclusively for this function. In conclusion, a direct impact of the crosses on the gold foil figures cannot be determined: both phenomena appear to have developed independently.

As argued above, a unique feature of the Scandinavian gold foils is their astonishing tininess. All other plaques and related objects from other cultures are larger, and therefore not only visible even from a distance, but also much easier to handle. Another interesting quality that distinguishes the gold foil figures from the other sheet objects is the fabrication of nearly identical pieces in remarkably large numbers (see above, sub-chapter MASS PRODUCTION VERSUS INDIVIDUALISATION).

Figural motifs

The question about Roman, Celtic, Byzantine or other (votive) plaques and other metalwork as possible sources of inspiration or models for the figural motifs on the gold foil figures was addressed several times during the workshop. Actually, it is a well-known fact that a Roman or Late Antique “legacy” can be found in many features of Germanic art and imagery. Roman models have also been discussed in connection with the small Scandinavian figurines of bronze or precious metal (ZACHRISSON in this vol.; MACKEPFRANG 1935; THRANE 1990; 2005; VOSS 1990).

As a rule, **Roman votive plaques** feature images of offerings and religious rites. Often goddesses and gods are depicted (FLECKER in this vol.; MARZINZIK in this vol., with Fig. 1 and 2; see also OEHRL in this vol., Figs. 16–17; 20; 64; 66–67), either in divine nakedness and characteristic postures, or equipped with their conventional attributes, occasionally including clothing, which make them identifiable. Interestingly, many of the plaques show the divinities in roles of ideal offerants (cf. SIMON 1953), exemplarily performing religious rites: gods worshipping gods, with the devices needed for that, such as offering bowls, altars, or other paraphernalia (see OEHRL in this vol., Fig. 67). The other main group of votive plaques depicts humans performing offerings, sometimes equipped with the same devices as the divinities (see FLECKER in this vol., Fig. 1). The images on the votive plaques, the persons depicted, and the actions they perform can be identified either with the help of inscriptions on the sheets themselves or by using parallels from other Roman pictorial sources (stone sculptures on altars, building ornaments, sarcophagi, and metal objects such as statuettes, coins, and jewellery). Roman written sources provide basic background information as well as detailed stories and contexts. On the gold foil figures, some objects can be identified that match the attributes of the Roman plaques and sculptures: for example, long staffs (Jupiter and Mars), drinking vessels (offering gods), and clubs (Hercules) may be interpreted as direct parallels (OEHRL in this vol.) and thus as descendants of Roman archetypes. On the other hand, there are no parallels for the couple versions on the gold foil figures, after all a major motif group.

In the course of the workshop, another class of **Roman sacrificial objects** was discussed as possible comparison (OEHRL in this vol.; WITTEYER 1999; 2004): small clay figures, which had been produced in large numbers that were deposited as offerings in temples or sanctuaries, for example in the Rhine region. Their motifs exhibit an astonishing similarity to those of the gold foil figures. There are single men and women, in each case with only few attributes (among them cornucopias and staffs), as well as couples of humans. Many of the objects depict humans in festive or formal dress, representing probably the sponsors themselves and thus portraying humans who made the sacrifice. This very notion could be a key for the interpretation and understanding of the figures shown on the gold foils of the North (see OEHRL in this vol.; see also below, sub-chapter FUNCTION AND PURPOSE).

Celtic figural art from the Continent must be understood as one of the sources of inspiration of early Germanic art in the Roman Iron Age. But although there are some intriguing parallels concerning individual pictorial elements on the gold foil figures, Celtic art can have had no direct impact on the much later images of the Vendel Period foils (BAGLEY in this vol.). The parallels may rather be explained with general characteristics in the imageries of the western world during the first millennium. The same applies to **early Christian art** and motifs (VERSTEGEN, in discussion; cf. also WATT 2015). An example for such a general trait may be seen in the framing of important images. The Roman emperor, Christian saints, and other important persons are often depicted as standing under an arch or within a frame, sometimes more specifically under an arched architectural element, which emphasise their dignity and power but also intensified the impression the image was intended to make on the beholder (see BEHR in this vol.). The same can be observed in the case of some gold foil figures (see e.g. WATT in this vol., Figs. 4d; 28; WAMERS in this vol., Fig. 1,6). In this light, their rounded frames can hardly be interpreted as doors (BACK DANIELSSON 1999, 13–14; HEDEAGER 2015, 139–141). Instead, they simply are a variation of similar images without

this kind of framing (cf. WAMERS in this vol., Fig. 1) and a way of highlighting the image within, to increase its visual impact.

An intriguing and yet relatively unknown find material from the 3rd to 7th centuries AD are anthropomorphic figures and foil **pendants from southeastern Europe** (RÁCZ 2012). Among them are rectangular pendants with anthropomorphic ornaments from the Ukraine, which are reminiscent of the gold foil figures, some of them even featuring embossed frames (see MYZGIN in this vol., Fig. 4). The majority of these objects date from the 3rd to 5th centuries, clearly predating the gold foil figures, and therefore could be considered as possible templates. However, from the more contemporaneous Avar finds, a direct link between the find categories could not be established. Further connecting factors can be discussed between elements of the material cultures of the Continent, the Ukraine, and the North at that time (see e.g. ANKE 1998; BÖHNER 1968). The Ukrainian finds can be discussed as possible templates of the gold foil figures (see MYZGIN in this vol.; Marzena PRZYBYŁA, in discussion). Yet the artefacts known today – mostly detector finds – seem to represent only the tip of an iceberg, and the links and cultural as well as trading relations between the early Germanic, Slavic, Gothic, Roman, steppe-nomadic, or other groups are issues for further research.

The early Christian **gold foil crosses** (HÜBENER 1975; TERP-SCHUNTER 2017) may be considered as an extremely important comparison group from the southern regions of Europe (see HELMBRECHT, Continent, in this vol.). Their embossed images are linked to the contemporaneous objects of the North primarily by their use of animal style. In the Langobardic and Alamannic areas, the gold foil crosses were an integral part of the burial custom, as they were sewed onto a shroud, which was then placed on the deceased person's body. In other regions – in the eastern Mediterranean – gold foil crosses might have served as votive offerings (VIERCK 1975): an interesting parallel, which could provide clues to the purpose of the gold foil figures (see below, sub-chapter FUNCTION AND PURPOSE).

Also from the eastern Mediterranean originate **early Byzantine objects** made of gold foil with embossed figural depictions (repoussé), which can be classified into two categories: jewellery made of framed or perforated coins or medallions and unframed votive plaques (PETRINA in this vol.). Among the coin jewellery, especially those examples are of particular interest, which depict the *dextrarum iunctio*, a marriage scene, as this motif is well suited for a comparison with the couple versions of the gold foil figures, while the unframed votive plaques might possibly provide clues to the function of gold foil figures (see below, sub-chapter FUNCTION AND PURPOSE).

During the workshop as well as in the contributions to this volume, it became apparent that the images of the gold foil figures were part of an overall occidental imagery, a common style of constructing pictorial art. Many of their elements can be traced back to the Roman Period, which functioned as a stimulus for many of the imageries of later times and cultures. But no direct roots or links could be identified, not even reliable templates or prototypes, neither in Celtic, Roman or Late Roman, and Byzantine art, nor in early Christian or medieval art, nor in Frankish objects or those from the Merovingian Period. Drawing on their expertise in figural art, our specialists all agreed that in their fields of research they never had encountered images or tiny objects of sheet metal really alike the gold foil figures. It is only in a more general way that the small foils can be compared with foreign artefacts, object classes, and motifs, and that some hints for the assessment of this special object type can be deduced. The tiny foils are a Scandinavian invention, emerging from Scandinavian traditions of motifs and styles in the first millennium AD.

Dresses and dress accessories do not feature on many gold foil figures, but where clothing details are present, they occasionally can give interesting hints for the overall interpretation of the find category. First, a type of male coat was studied.

The gold foil figures of the so-called “princely group” (“Fürstengruppe”) (WATT 1992, 209–211; see WAMERS in this vol., Fig. 1) – comprising more than 225 examples – not only form the largest, but also the best-known die family. It is generally assumed that the **long capes or braided coats** (“Bortenmäntel”) of the male figures of this group should be interpreted as “kaftans” (see FISCHER, WAMERS and HELMBRECHT, *Continent*, in this vol.; HOLMQVIST 1977, 202; ALMGREN 1980, 165–166; WATT 2004, 171–172; MANNERING 2017, 56–58; BÖHNER 1968). The kaftan is considered as indicative of cultural influences from the southeast, as coats of this kind were fashionable in large areas of Asia (see KUBAREV 2017, 54–71). Frequently, they were made of particularly valuable materials (such as silk and gold thread), with magnificent woven patterns and the hems were adorned with furs or trimmings, as is demonstrated by both excavated examples and pictures. Usually, they are knee-length and tied either in the middle of the body (symmetrical type) or to one side (asymmetrical type). If the identification as kaftans is accurate, then the gold foil figures clearly depict examples of the asymmetrical type (cf. the figures in STEPANOV 2010, Fig. 24; 26; HEINRICH-TAMASKA/WINGER 2018, 222 fig. 5/21a). The side of the overlapping front cannot be determined, due to many mirror-image variants of the motif. Identical garments are known from depictions on Vendel Period helmet panels and other pieces of weaponry in Sweden, Britain, and central Europe (HELMBRECHT, *Vendel Period*, in this vol.). It will hardly be possible to reconstruct how or why an originally Asian dress came to the North. Its link to the triumphal *trabea* of Roman rulers has already been pointed out (FISCHER in this vol.; SCHRAMM 1954). At any rate, kaftans are not suited as indicators of a direct Hunnic or Avar influence in Scandinavia, as the transfer of the new garment may well have happened through third parties: especially groups of horse-warriors, who served as mercenaries in the Frankish army and comprised members of different origins, could have introduced the kaftan as functional clothing for horsemen. From there it may have caught on and became a hallmark of an “international” warrior elite (cf. WAMERS in this vol.). This scenario is not improbable, because it is remarkable that the women’s dress on the gold foil figures does not betray a similar influence, even though in Asia, kaftans were worn by women as well. The women’s clothing – with an ankle-length dress and a cape-like open cloak – appears to have followed another, probably Nordic tradition, as it is depicted on contemporaneous picture stones as well as on small figurines and brooches and continued to be worn in an identical style well into the Viking Age. As an aside, it should be mentioned that the baggy trousers known from various media as part of male clothing do not occur on the gold foil figures.

The biggest surprise during the workshop involves the question of interpreting the **gestures and postures** of the depicted figures. We all agreed that the frequently recurring hand gestures and body positions on the gold foil figures must have borne a strong semantic meaning in their time (especially HEIZMANN and VERSTEGEN, in discussion): obviously, it was essential to show the hands in specific positions. Also, the hands are often pictured in a remarkably exaggerated size, which may underline their significance as cipher-like pictorial elements. What is more, the images seem not to have been designed freely and individually, but within a standardised and codified system. They are limited in the overall variety of motifs: the majority of them represent, as Margrethe Watt has thoroughly demonstrated, just a few die families or motif groups, which may vary only in detail (WATT in this vol.). Limitation and standardising, however, indicate that the images must have had a definite meaning, which must have been understood within the whole distribution area of the foils in more or less the same way (ZACHRISSON, in discussion). They were designed for a greater audience and bore a meaning of universal importance, a message within. Therefore, several questions concerning the

deciphering of those codes emerged: do the specific gestures, postures, dresses, and attributes create a readable code? Is there, for example, a “grammar of gestures”? Are the hand gestures comparable to the *mudras* in India or to the hand gestures of medieval saints, the significance of which is relatively well known to us due to contemporary written sources? And can we find a key to the successful interpretation of the ciphers of the gold foil figures?

At the beginning of our project, we thought that it would be possible to understand at least some of these ciphers with the help of gestures known from other cultures and objects. Illuminations in (late) medieval manuscripts and legal codices, for example, have been used as a basis for the interpretation of some of the gestures of the gold foil figures (WATT 2004, 210–211; 2015, 162–163; RATKE/SIMEK 2006a; 2006b). This method seemed reasonable, because long continuities in pictorial motifs have been studied previously and with excellent results – for instance when Karl Hauck focussed his interest on the gold bracteates (cf. OEHL in this vol.). During the workshop, we considered several gestures which came up in the North during the Migration Period and occurred on the gold foil figures, for example the hand raised in front of the mouth (see KRISTOFFERSEN and MAGNUS in this vol.), and we hoped that we would be able to detect a continuity of significant gestures from Antiquity to the Middle Ages and persuasively identify at least some of them.

One of the scholars at our workshop was an expert for medieval hand gestures, Axel Chr. Gampp from Switzerland. To our surprise, he pointed out that no codified gestures existed over lengthy periods of time at all (see also GAMPP 2008). On the contrary, they always seem to be limited to a very short timeframe and to be quite regional, too. And thirdly, they are exclusively linked to particular object classes which thus each encompass their own “cosmos” of hand gestures and body language. This assessment was confirmed by the scholars of Roman, Byzantine, and early Christian art (Manuel FLECKER, Yvonne PETRINA, and Ute VERSTEGEN, in discussion): here, too, no generally valid codes for hand gestures exist. Actually, not a single gesture can be identified and traced through the ages, not even the *dextrarum iunctio* (see PETRINA in this vol.) or the gestures of speech. Thus, illuminations in manuscripts of the high medieval period cannot be used for the interpretation of depictions of gestures on any other objects, whether they were older, younger, or even contemporaneous. This methodological problem was underlined by the results of the comparison between the gestures of the gold foil figures and examples from the Viking Age. Not even here any continuities can be observed: only very few motifs and gestures of the gold foil figures continued to be used in later periods (HELMBRECHT, Vendel Period, in this vol.).

With this realisation, our hopes of being able to ‘read’ the gestures on the gold foil figures by comparing them with better-known gestures depicted in other media and especially medieval manuscripts were crushed painfully and completely.

EXCURSUS ON SEMANTIC MEANING: MORTALS OR DIVINE BEINGS?

During the workshop, we chose not to discuss the iconographical interpretations of specific images in depth, leaving this task for future research. Still, some thoughts on iconography were brought forward and should briefly be mentioned here.

From the beginning, interpretations of the gold foil figures have been divided between two main strands: while some scholars saw depictions of human figures, others spoke of gods and goddesses. For the latter, Norse or Germanic gods were suggested, mainly from the Vanir family (e.g. OLSEN 1909; STEINSLAND 1991; HAUCK 1993; 1994), but also some other supernatural beings like the giantess Gerðr. The couple versions, for example, were interpreted as the scene of her marriage to the god Freyr (DE VRIES 1956/57, 2; 192; STEINSLAND 1991). Proposals for mortal beings included predominantly rulers and founders of dynasties (GUSTAFSON 1900) as well as the dead and their ghosts (RATKE

2009, 212–214). References to scenes from legal practice have also been considered (RATKE/SIMEK 2006a; 2006b).

No decision can be made straightaway because there are no clear criteria for any identification. As inscriptions or other unequivocal designations or references and any written evidence about the gold foil figures are lacking completely, the question can only be answered indirectly, if at all. Thus, a comprehensive and detailed evaluation of the images is a fundamental requirement, before any conclusions can be drawn.

On many gold foil figures the clothing of the male figures (kaftan) appears to follow the same conventions as that of the men on the helmet panels (see above; HELMBRECHT, Continent, in this vol.). As argued above, the warriors on these panels belonged to the same social group as those on the gold foil figures. Especially the horsemen on the helmets replicate ancient patterns of portraying fallen warriors (WAMERS in this vol.). Karl Hauck pointed to the fact that the helmet panels are known from exactly the same distribution area as the Germanic heroic tales and sagas and thus may very well be representing such heroes (HAUCK 1976, 593). In light of this material, we may conclude that in fact humans are shown in both find categories, likely members of the elites. They were depicting *themselves* – on different types of objects and in the act of performing different actions. While the helmet panels invariably show scenes from military settings, such as combat, fighting horsemen, and perhaps weapon parades and weapon dances, the vast majority of the gold foil figures feature no weapons,¹⁰ no helmets (including horned helmets), no horsemen, at all. Instead, some of them show more peaceful, domestic objects, such as drinking vessels or jewellery, which are also found as archaeological finds and belonged to the upper stratum of elite material culture. This underpins the notion that most probably humans were depicted on both the panels and the foils – supporting the conclusion derived from the comparative discussion of the Roman clay votive figurines (see OEHL in this vol.).

However, it might be conceivable that gods as well as humans are represented on the images, as gods of old cultures frequently were portrayed in the same style of clothing as high-status humans (Olof SUNDQVIST, in discussion; RATKE/SIMEK 2006b, 189; 313; RATKE 2009, 206–210). From Antiquity, pictures of gods engaging in exemplary ceremonies of sacrifice are well known (SIMON 1953). The underlying assumption is that gods in human shape elevated a ritual that was usually performed by humans but transferred into a divine sphere. This might also be an interesting approach for the interpretation of the gold foil figures (see BEHR in this vol. for one possible way of distinguishing between humans and gods). Furthermore, deified humans – beings in-between humans and gods – may have existed in the religion of the Old North, as tradition tells us in respect of Óláfr Geirstaðaálfr, a king who turned into an elf (SUNDQVIST, in discussion; SUNDQVIST 2015).

Without doubt, it would be useful for the identification of the figures shown on the gold foil figures, if we could identify the acts they are engaged in. As mentioned above, their images appear to derive from a more peaceful background than those on the helmet panels, but beyond this, it is hard to tell what exactly the figures are doing, because unfortunately there are no actions, scenes, or processes that could easily be identified. The figures appear static, and only are characterised by their dress and attributes (if any) and/or their body postures – but not by performing any kind of distinguishing actions.¹¹ This probably also applies to the couple versions, being just as static as the single

10 With very few exceptions: see above.

11 Some of the anthropomorphic figures on the gold foils are shown with the tips of their feet pointing downwards. This pose has been used in ancient art as a cipher for dancing (ecstatic dance of the maenads, dancing priestesses, and similar scenes), and is also known from Egyptian tapestries of the 5th to 7th centuries. It remains unclear, however, whether this interpretation holds true in the case of the gold foil figures or whether they – analogous to Migration Period figurines with neck-ring – ought to be interpreted as hanged or hanging men (regarding the ciphers for running and flying, see SCHMIDT 1909).

figures. Thus, no promising approaches for an interpretation may be expected here (see also below, sub-chapter *MASTERS AND USERS: A NEW SOCIAL ORDER*).

It may be a small consolation to remember that even in Greek or Roman Antiquity it is rarely possible to identify unequivocally the figures depicted and to differentiate between images of humans and gods unless inscriptions or distinctive attributes exist (FLECKER, in discussion), and identical motifs had different meanings in different contexts (Jennifer BAGLEY, in discussion).

In future research it may be fruitful to delve even deeper into questions of iconography and semantic meaning of the gold foil figures, in order to read and understand their messages and significance. We hope to do this in Schleswig.

FUNCTION AND PURPOSE

A crucial question concerns the original function of the gold foil figures: what were those tiny, delicate objects used for? During the workshop, we discarded ideas of any – in modern terms – practical usage as the original purpose of the objects: they were too small and fragile and easily damaged, obviously not made to be handled. The very rare cases of holes or perforations are not enough to sustain the notion that they were made to be sewn onto clothing (BRØNDSTED 1969, 315), and the idea that they had been glued to a more solid carrier (GUSTAFSON 1900) also is unreasonable, as no remains of any kind of adhesive have ever been found. The gold foil figures could not possibly have been used as personal adornments, fittings, pendants, or similar decoration, and they are also not suited as documents or certificates, pilgrim badges, invitation tickets, or festival listels, as has been suggested in recent research (see e.g. BAASTRUP 2015). All this is rather implausible, just as the idea of imagining them stuck individually to the posts of great hall buildings (although we did not reach a consensus on this latter issue during the workshop).¹² Even the transport of the pieces seems quite difficult without spoiling or compromising them. If at all, individual foils would have been carried in small boxes or cases, while in bigger numbers, they might have been distributed from special containers, if they were needed for usage at different places at the same time.

Though rare examples of the gold foil figures appear to have been modified for permanent use, for example by fastening them to metal plates and attaching a loop for usage as pendants or amulets (approximately 1 % of the total at the most: see Margrethe WATT, in discussion), their normal and most common condition would have been characterised by their diminutive size and their fragility, both severely limiting any practical handling. In fact, it seems that the foils have not been made for any permanent purpose, but rather for a transient one. Most likely, they were used in a single specific process or event, like in a temporary performance or action (see Ute VERSTEGEN, in discussion).

It is an interesting fact that the carefully executed images on the gold foil figures are not discernible even from a relatively short distance. They are virtually hidden, demonstrating that no value was attached to conspicuousness (HEIZMANN and PESCH, in discussion). They were clearly not made for public display, nor for a greater audience to see the details. If so, why were they made in the first place? This leads to the old question of to whom the images were addressed. As a possible answer, we agreed that the intended recipients were probably divine beings (HELMBRECHT, in discussion). It is a common enough device to use hidden messages for communications with the other world (cf. SUND-

12 From other contexts it is well known, however, that the believers buy gold leaf, for example, and attach it to the surfaces of pillars, walls, or statues in the temple (cf. the temple of Buddha in Angkor Wat). In classical Antiquity, it was customary in some places that sacrificial money was glued to pillars, according to VERSTEGEN (in discussion).

QVIST in this vol.). As metal foil objects were often used in sanctuaries as votive plaques this seems to be, in combination with the superior material gold, the most reasonable conclusion.

The idea of communicating with the other world or the gods by means of ornamented and more or less fragile metal sheets is a long-lasting and ongoing tradition in the Western world (cf. BEHR, FLECKER, PETRINA, and SUNDQVIST in this vol.). Even today, for instance in Catholic and Orthodox environments, metal plaques are still in use: as devotional articles, they often can be found in churches deposited as tokens of gratitude (*ex voto*), for example after the recovery from an illness (SUNDQVIST in this vol.). They are made in the shapes of legs, arms, noses, eyes, ears, and other body parts, and they can be bought in specialised shops or even in the very churches. The function of such “non-utilitarian votive offerings” (WEINRYB 2016, 5) lies solely in their nature as donated objects (SUNDQVIST in this vol.). Hence, it was suggested that the gold foil figures might have been representations of specific pleas or requests to the gods, for example wishes for wealth, fortune, and protection against evil, or – the double versions – for a good marriage and fertility (for more details, see the discussion in SUNDQVIST in this vol., sub-chapter HIEROS GAMOS). However, the majority of the foils seem not to have been used individually, but in larger numbers (see above), and this could be considered as evidence against individual pleas directly linked to single gold foil figures, and in favour of rather more collective performances in which many people were involved (see below).

The interpretation of the gold foil figures as objects with a religious function is supported by the fact that they usually have been found at places with sacral functions (WATT 1992, 221–224), such as the great central places of Sorte Muld, Gudme/Lundeborg, Helgö, or Uppåkra (HÄRDH/LARSSON 2002; PESCH 2011), but also at places that later attracted attention by being the building sites of the earliest Christian churches, such as Mære or Vingrom in Norway. Frequently, they were discovered within or in close proximity to the great stately halls that also are considered to have been the settings of ritual activity (HERSCHEND 1997; 1999; HEDEAGER 2015, 141–143; SUNDQVIST 2016). At find spots such as these, however, other uses are by no means precluded. We are not going to go any deeper into this issue here, as it is planned to be one of the subjects of a second workshop of our project.

Nevertheless, it must be mentioned that especially at places such as Sorte Muld, with its numerous deposits of gold foil figures, a comparison with great cult centres of the ancient world may be suggested: cult centres, being central places, were visited by many people and exerted widespread appeal. Here, a specialised cult was able to develop, which provided a livelihood to those serving it: on the one hand, as priestesses and priests or cult specialists (SUNDQVIST in this vol.; 2005; 2007), or as cult masters or offerants (HAUCK 1992a, 558; cf. 1994), and on the other hand, as breeders and purveyors of sacrificial animals, manufacturers of materials for sacrifices – among them gold foil figures – as well as in the procurement of raw materials or the delivery of provisions and other everyday items required by all participants. Possibly, even accommodation and food for pilgrims and other visitors were taken care of, as obviously this was an official and organised cult (HAUCK 1992a). This supra-regional concentration of religious functions appears to have led to both a standardisation of rites and the sacrificial materials. The standardisation of the gold foil figures, produced in bulk, may well be a manifestation of this process. Centralisation can cause a local economic upsurge, but may also often lead to the commercialisation of the cult (PESCH, in discussion; cf. PESCH 2003, 120).

Margrethe Watt in her publications compared the small foils with sacred temple monies, as they were (and are) common in many religions, such as Judaism in Antiquity (WATT 1992, 221–224; *passim*; WATT in this vol.; see also SUNDQVIST in this vol., sub-chapter TEMPLE MONEY). These particular and often specially made media could only be acquired in the temple district. They were the only means

to buy adequate (e.g. *kosher*) sacrificial animals or other services or pay the temple fee.¹³ However, due to their smallness and fragility, the gold foil figures cannot have been a practical substitute for the exchange of coinage or bullion. Thus, Margrethe Watt, Karl Hauck, and others reasoned that they might have been a sacral currency after all, “but not in the context of a normal trade in goods” (WATT 1992, 224; cf. also HAUCK 1992a, 529; 1998, 318; VEIT 1982). Instead, it could have been a kind of sacrificial money that at the sacred places was employed either directly by the visitors (after they had bought the foils) or by the cult specialists or priestesses and priests, for example during central feasts of sacrifices. The details of this cult practice cannot be determined at the current state of research – the discussion of this issue also is one of the aims of the second workshop.

For the images on the gold foil figures in particular, some fitting external parallels can be consulted, which also originate from the context of sanctuaries and temples. The Roman and Byzantine votive plaques have already been mentioned. It is important to notice that the depictions often are quite stereotypical or even artless, probably to allow access to their visual language also to the non-initiated. This could explain the development of local “dialects” in the motifs (FLECKER, in discussion).

Terracotta figurines from Roman sanctuaries, made in huge numbers for the sale to pilgrims, often depict people performing offerings (see above; OEHL in this vol.), and this might be a useful parallel to the gold foil figures.

Most gold foil figures bear no direct traces of manipulation or any intentional change of the images once they had been stamped with the die. This observation makes the ones that have been found crumpled up or folded all the more interesting. Unlike those foils that may have been accidentally wrinkled by the plough or otherwise damaged while they lay in the soil, these examples are meticulously folded over once or twice, which indicates deliberate handling. What are the reasons for these actions?

We may consider the golden plaques from ancient Rome: these were folded and subsequently inserted into amulet pendants (VERSTEGEN, in discussion). Curse tablets from Antiquity to early modern periods, which often were available in sanctuaries, were said to be “activated” by folding (MARZINZIK, in discussion), and liturgical objects and vessels were ritually destroyed and buried after they had been used, a practice known from ancient Egypt to the Christian world of modern times (PETRINA, in discussion). The ritualistic bending of weapons and other objects before they were consigned to the ground as a sacrifice was performed in the North especially in the course of the great weapon and equipment deposits as well as in burials. A further example for deliberately folded objects are gold bracteates (BEHR/PESTELL 2014, 58). These parallels offer further indications for a religious function of the gold foil figures.

Based on the evidence from the various find spots and their surrounding areas it is not possible to identify any particular single use of the gold foil figures (cf. HELMBRECHT 2011, 272). Still, some relationship with religion and sacrifice is obvious. Performing rituals and sacrifices was probably another aspect of the warrior culture that is reflected in both the helmet panels and the gold foil figures, and perhaps even constituted a prerequisite for these societies to function properly (see below, next sub-chapter).

Even if resorting to this kind of conclusion is often an expression of helplessness, we cannot find a better explanation for the gold foil figures than their interpretation as cult objects, made as media for the communication between humans and “the other world”, the supernatural spheres.

13 Temple money has repeatedly been brought into discredit, as it created the opportunity to increase the price for offered services twice over, as it were: often, it had a lower material value than the (secular) monies paid for it, and the price of the services in the temple was hard to compare with similar services (purchase of sacrificial animals, for example) outside of the temple district.

The gold foil figures were produced at few, special sites, mainly the multifunctional so-called “central places” where they have also been found in large numbers. Transfer from one area into another appears to have existed, but to have been limited, as only few figures that were made by the same die have been found at different places (WATT, in discussion; cf. WATT 1999a, 138; HÖLSCHER 1982, 16–17). This, however, is probably the result of the dies being transported rather than the figures (HELMBRECHT, in discussion). Yet, the question remains who exactly produced the gold foil figures and on whose behalf. There can be no doubt that the majority of the gold foil figures were made by experienced craftspersons who on the one hand were skilled in the necessary techniques, on the other had profound knowledge of the formalised and standardised imagery. They can be compared with the so-called “bracteate masters” who were responsible for the design and manufacture of the Migration Period gold bracteates with their images and (in some instances) runic inscriptions (HEIZMANN and PESCH, in discussion; cf. IK 1, Einleitung; PESCH 2007, 13). This term might refer to a highly specialised and highly qualified individual, but also to a complete workshop, where labour was divided. The masters of the dies for gold foil figures (the actual stamping could have been done by untrained workers) appear to have had their workshops in central places, especially Sorte Muld, Gudme/Lundeborg, Uppåkra, Slöinge, Ravlunda, and Helgö. These sites not only were the main areas of utilisation of the small foils, but through the presence of the rulers and the armed retainers, they also provided the necessary protection for the goldsmiths. Elites and their well-organised trade links probably enabled the access to gold and other imported metals. This applies especially to the southern Scandinavian gold foil figures, which represent the majority of the material. By contrast, the Norwegian examples, all of them couple versions, seem to be slightly younger and to originate in a different milieu. They were often found at places that were connected to Viking Age seats of power. Some of those seats appear to have had a long cult tradition, as the gold foil finds at early churches (e.g. Mære or Vingrom) indicate. The impressive Tu hill in southwest Norway with its “tunanlegg” and several grave mounds is known to have been a supra-regional gathering place.

It is rather surprising, however, that so far no gold foil figures have been found in those important centres that are known historically as the seats of high kings and their dynasties: there none from Gamla Uppsala in Sweden, for example, nor from Gamle Lejre in Denmark or Avaldsnes and Borre in Norway (ZACHRISSON, in discussion). This situation may change with new finds, of course (WATT, in discussion), but at present, it appears symptomatic. The heyday of historically known royal seats tends to have been in the late Vendel Period and the Viking Age, thus during an age when – at least in southern Scandinavia – gold foil figures already had gone out of fashion to some extent. At the current state of research, the tiny foils belong to a political phase in which the three great Scandinavian kingdoms had not yet begun to emerge.

Gold foil figures are linked especially to petty kings and local warlords (ZACHRISSON, in discussion).¹⁴ We have repeatedly commented on the proximity of the postholes in which several foils were discovered to the high seats in the stately halls (cf. ZACHRISSON and SUNDQVIST in this vol.; HEDEAGER 2015, 141–143). It is possible that they had been glued to posts of the high seat or the hall itself (LARSSON/LENNATORP 2004, 23; HEDEAGER 2015, 143) and either fell down to the ground or were ritually deposited. The interpretation of these contexts is still difficult (WATT, in discussion).¹⁵

14 In Helgö, gold foil figures occur around the year 600, when the other workshops had already left and Helgö had been reduced to the harbour, but apparently with some cultic functions (Kristina LAMM, in discussion).

15 These questions are going to be studied as a research subject at the next workshop, which intends to examine and compare the respective feature contexts in detail.

In a dynasty the marriage of a ruler is an important issue. The couple versions of the gold foil figures have repeatedly been interpreted in a dynastic context, as both portrayal and evidence of marriage alliances (cf. ZACHRISSON and SUNDQVIST, both in this vol.; STEINSLAND 1991). It has been suggested that the image depicts either an ideal couple as model spouses or rather divine beings believed to be the dynasty's earliest ancestors – or in fact the actual bridal couple. Especially the last suggestion raises the question, however, why the pictures should be so very small: they are hardly suited to function as a kind of ostentatious “announcement”, which surely would have required a much larger picture, easily noticeable for the larger public. The general standardisation of the motifs as well as the presence of examples made with the same die but found at different places do not support this interpretation either. If the images, in fact, referred to ancestors, a question about different variants of the couple version at the same place arises: should not rather each dynasty have had their own particular imagery with very specific characteristics that exclusively occurred in their specific home areas? The supra-regional scheme of gold foil figures argues against this idea. Rather, it appears that the images are rooted in a common cult. They were fabricated by specialised, well-trained, and widely interconnected craftspersons, and therefore feature images that were of supra-regional relevance. Most probably, they were used in large numbers, by cult specialists as representatives of the local/regional community.

Relatively little is known about Vendel Period society, in which the gold foil figures were produced. Their imagery suggests that like the standardised depictions on weapon panels they too reflect the martial culture of a prominent class of warriors.

Some other artefacts that are known from Scandinavia and Britain, especially the helmet panels with cognate motifs from Vendel and Valsgärde in Uppland and Sutton Hoo in East Anglia are relevant in this context (see HELMBRECHT, Vendel Period, in this vol.; cf. QUAST 2002). They represent, as Egon Wamers argued, an “international” warrior elite with their own philosophy and view of life (WAMERS in this vol.; WAMERS 2018). Thus, the iconography of the gold foil figures that show the same social group, but were found exclusively (with one single possible exception) in Scandinavia – can be considered in a more supra-regional context. But what was the role of the Northern people: were they just following a foreign custom or fashion, or were they a driving force behind it? As the objects depicted on gold foil figures and helmet panels, such as jewellery, drinking vessels, weapons, horse fittings, dresses, or helmets, are also well known from the Scandinavian archaeological find material and thus derive from a Scandinavian environment, it can be argued that the images create an entirely native Nordic cosmos, which absorbed only few inspiration from the South and the Mediterranean world.

In contrast to the helmet panels and their imagery of war and combat, which represented an explicitly male setting, the gold foil figures derived from very different and apparently more domestic and peaceful contexts, most probably connected to some religious event(s) (see above, sub-chapter FUNCTION AND PURPOSE) or festive act(s) that needed spiritual sanctioning (such as marriages, shown on the couple versions [?]). Even the dagger-like weapons in the hands of male figures on some of the foils can be interpreted as sacrificial knives. Women are involved in the performances to a large extent, be it in the couple versions or as single figures. Unlike the preceding Migration Period, when images of women were very rare indeed, during the Vendel Period, many depictions of women existed, on objects such as pendants, as figurines, or gold foil figures – a new feature in the imagery in the North. This observation possibly reflects new roles that women adopted in Vendel Period society.¹⁶

16 There are some pendants and figurines dating to the Viking Age featuring women with weapons (for the pendants, see HELMBRECHT 2011, 306, with fig. 26; for the Hårby figurine, see HENRIKSEN/PETERSEN 2013), but images of armed women do not occur on the gold foil figures, nor during the Vendel/Merovingian Period in general.

While the Migration Period seems to have been a relatively stable, peaceful, and wealthy era in the North, the Vendel/Merovingian Period was a time of riots and turbulence not only in the North but in Europe more generally. In Continental and English textual sources, frequent wars, massacres, and lootings are recorded. Interdisciplinary research has investigated a climatic crisis between AD 536 and around 660, the “Late Antique Little Ice Age” (LALIA) (BÜNTGEN et al. 2016; see also AXBOE 2001; HØILUND NIELSEN 2005; GRÄSLUND/PRICE 2012; LÖWENBORG 2012). Triggered by massive volcanic activity, the sky of the northern hemisphere was covered by a heavy dust veil and became dark, the summers were cold and dry, the crops could not grow properly. This caused severe famine, plagues and pandemics, wars, and even the decline and fall of entire empires in Europe and Asia. The affected people and regions found different ways to cope with these challenges. In the North they pursued their own path: one of the archaeological clues indicating change is the overall decline in the number of gold objects (cf. above, sub-chapter GOLD: AN EXCEPTIONAL MATERIAL): while during the Migration Period, solidi were imported and used in large numbers as raw material, the last recorded solidi found in the North had been minted for the emperors Theodebert I of Austrasia (534–548) and Justinian I (527–565) (cf. FISCHER in this vol.). It appears that at the same time the well-established and well-functioning long-distance connections broke down, disrupting political and social structures in Scandinavia and elsewhere. The production of gold bracteates came to an abrupt end, and many of them were buried in the ground (AXBOE 2001). It seems that modified or entirely new religious beliefs emerged that were accompanied by centralisation and standardisation of cult practices and cult objects. In times of fear, darkness, and starvation, people were engaged with mainly two things: praying and offering sacrifices to ask for better days and fertility and fighting for the last remaining resources. The helmet panels with the depictions of warriors and combat may be seen as evidence of the latter aspect, while the former is mirrored by the images on the tiny golden foils. All things considered, the concept, manufacture, and usage of gold foil figures must be regarded as a result of supra-regional crises. However, they also are evidence of cultural survival and social reorganisation.

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