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The Image as a Normative Force

Introduction

Ancient images have long played an important role in archaeological research. Especially in the archaeological study of past societies with little or no written records, images are often used as evidence for contemporary mentalities and world-views, myths and ideas. Images like objects, performances or rituals are explained as part of a symbolic language that was shared within a society. Even if perceptions of images and other visual displays vary significantly between individuals according to their educational, social, religious or political backgrounds and views, ways of seeing are culturally constructed and embedded within common cultural assumptions and understandings. Visual experiences are part of collective ways of comprehension and communication.¹

Images have also long been understood as impacting thinking, emotions and behaviour of their viewers. Pioneering have been the works by Paul Zanker, Hans Belting and David Freedberg who all explored the power of images in various political and religious contexts.² Horst Bredekamp introduced the concept of the ‘image act’ which he defined as the effects images exert under specific conditions that are set by those who made the images.³ He argued that images can shape history just like any other action. Through the act of creating images an image act can be effective. Images have an active quality in relation to the interplay between the image and those who face or touch it.⁴

1 Morgan 2012, 5.

2 Zanker 1987; Belting 1990; Freedberg 1991.

3 Bredekamp 2015, 59–64.

4 Bredekamp 2015, 60.

Still, the agency of images in the past has only fairly recently become a major theme in historical and archaeological research under the influence of the ‘visual turn’ when images themselves became the object of research and not just a means for research.⁵ Instead of studying images merely as historical documents the emphasis is shifting towards the formative aspects of images, their abilities to shape thoughts or attitudes or actions.

Various analytical approaches towards the exploration of the multiple roles of images in different historical periods are developed that go beyond the traditional identifications of material culture in the past as shown on the images or iconographical and functional analyses or viewers’ receptions of images.⁶ Design, aesthetics, materiality and specific visual means that contribute to the creation of meaning are in the focus of methodological and theoretical discussions. Increasingly the ways in which the material ‘real’ images created mental images and how these inner images directed the understanding of the ‘real’ images are explored.⁷

The discussions tend to focus on pictorial representations from literate societies in historical periods but these various approaches towards a deeper understanding of the agency of images are also relevant for pictures from prehistory. The study of pictures in prehistoric periods faces particular challenges because knowledge about cultural, political, social or religious contexts tends to be fragmentary at best. Still, the traditional focus on the materiality of archaeological finds can contribute an additional dimension to the study of images when concentrating on the technical and material aspects of art works and the embodied knowledge of making it.⁸ Instead of considering an image as complete and finished, a material approach can provide an understanding of a work of art as a process where the materials are not perceived as inert but as malleable and interactive. Thus the making of images can be interpreted as an ongoing action that was meaningful and that itself gave the images substance and significance.⁹

In his study of pictures on archaeological objects from the Celtic and early medieval periods, Peter S. Wells was interested in the impact of images. He employed methods from cognitive psychology and neuroscience when he focused on the visual qualities of images and demonstrated how they affected the ways viewers saw and interacted with them.¹⁰ He argued that visual perceptions of images differed be-

5 Paul 2006.

6 Paul 2006, 113–18.

7 Belting 2007, 14–16.

8 Jones – Cochrane 2018, 12–17.

9 Back Danielsson 2013.

10 Wells 2008, 37.

tween viewers from different periods and cultural environments and consequently their world-views.¹¹

In this paper the focus will be specifically on the impact images could exert on setting and reinforcing religious norms in a society that is only known through its material culture which has been discovered in archaeological research but lacks contemporary documentary sources that may refer to norms and values. As a case study gold pendants with figurative images, so-called gold bracteates, will be discussed that have been excavated predominantly in southern Scandinavia and that can be dated to the 5th and 6th centuries. By discussing visual and material features of these objects and the ways they affected the perceptions of their viewers it is possible to argue that these images did not merely illustrate mythical deities from Norse pre-Christian religion who had pre-existed invisibly in an oral tradition but contributed to the setting and affirming of new norms of ‘seeing’ and relating to the divine. Through their visuality the images gave shape and attributes to the divine and thus created and standardised the characters and roles.

Images and Norms

Stefanie Knauss and Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati proposed a theoretical framework for the exploration of the relationship between images and norms in their introduction to an issue of the journal *Religion & Gender* that comprised several case studies of “the influence of visual culture on gender norms” in various religious contexts from different periods.¹² Although this issue comprised studies that all referred to societies from the early modern to the modern periods in which textual sources existed that addressed contemporary norms the methodological guidelines they developed are also useful for the study of norms and images in pre-literate societies.

To study the relationship between norms and images Knauss and Pezzoli-Olgiati specified their understanding of “images as individual and social practices” and “in the context of practices”.¹³ Thus pictures are perceived not as inanimate objects but through their material presence and their images as active media that, here following W. J. T. Mitchell’s thesis of the wilfulness of images, communicate with the viewer and demand a relationship.¹⁴ Focusing on religious imagery they emphasise the active role of pictures in the communication with another world. “Through their representations, and often also in their material presence, they claim the power to

11 Wells 2008.

12 Knauss – Pezzoli-Olgiati 2015, 1.

13 Knauss – Pezzoli-Olgiati 2015, 2.

14 Mitchell 2004, 6–11; Knauss – Pezzoli-Olgiati 2015, 3.

connect and affect the realm of the immanent [...]”¹⁵ Images are thus interpreted as objects that are used as media with which humans through seeing them, possibly touching, venerating or speaking to them can influence a transcendent sphere.¹⁶

Another feature when studying the normative force of images is their repetitive-ness. Particularly the motifs of images in religious contexts tend to be replicated and thus are instantly recognisable to the adherent. Whilst images always evoke a range of different mental images and associations among the viewers, their reiteration evokes and reinforces specific norms and values. Knauss and Pezzoli-Olgiati also discuss the role of institutions that use and control images, like rituals or symbolic acts to reaffirm its authority and they conclude

[c]onceiving of visual communication as practice involving the image, its individual viewers and individual and social imaginaries allows us to conceptually link the activity of seeing with the regulating practices of institutions and thus provides the theoretical basis to investigate the normative dimension of images, their normative power [...]”¹⁷

These four aspects, an understanding of images as practice, the role of images in practices, the repetition of motifs and the involvement of an institution in monitoring images, provide a useful methodical framework when investigating Scandinavian gold bracteates as objects that have impacted religious norms and normative ritual behaviour in 5th and 6th century Scandinavia.

What are Gold Bracteates?

Gold bracteates are round pendants that were worn on necklaces. They are one-sided gold foils that were stamped with a matrice die showing figurative images with anthropomorphic and zoomorphic designs. The gold foil was framed along the edge with a gold wire and a loop was attached.¹⁸ Sizes of these pendants vary between under 2 cm to over 12 cm. On the larger pendants the central figurative image was surrounded by one or more concentric zones that were decorated with individual stamps, mostly of geometrical patterns (**Fig. 1**). Most bracteate dies are only represented by one pendant. However, also up to 14 copies that had been made with the same die have been discovered (IK 479).

15 Knauss – Olgiati 2015, 3.

16 See also Belting 1990.

17 Knauss – Olgiati 2015, 8.

18 All bracteates that have been found before 2011 are included in an iconographical catalogue (IK) with photos, drawings and detailed descriptions.



Fig. 1: C-bracteate from Åkarp, Scania, Sweden (IK 5) with a decorated border zone, 4:1, diameter 34 mm x 2 (Photo: U. Bruxe, Historiska museet, Stockholm).

The majority of the finds were discovered in southern Scandinavia, including the Danish islands, Jutland, southern Sweden and the Baltic islands, but they were also found in the adjacent areas of south-west Norway, eastern Sweden, and along the Baltic and North Sea coastlines in Poland, northern Germany, Frisia, northern France and eastern Britain and also as far south as Hungary and southern Germany.¹⁹

¹⁹ For a distribution map see Heizmann – Axboe 2011, xi.

In the central area of their distribution bracteates have been discovered almost always in small depositions consisting of one or more bracteates or of bracteates together with other precious-metal objects like jewellery, occasionally also with scabbard mouth-pieces, Roman coins or payment gold.²⁰ These were sacrificial depositions and not treasure hoards because they were often buried in inaccessible wetlands and their composition tended to be quite consistent, what Sally Crawford called “repetitive orthodoxy” signifying religious ritual behaviour.²¹ In the peripheral areas of their distribution, bracteates have been discovered in graves and in hoards.²²

With over 1100 bracteates that are now known they form one of the largest groups of a particular find type in the archaeology of post-Roman Scandinavia. It is, of course, unknowable whether they represent 1%, 5% or 10% of the number of bracteates that once existed. Most bracteates are found as single finds or in small hoards with under five pendants. As they were probably made, used and deposited over a limited period of some three generations they appear to have been distributed widely both locally and also socially. Despite their precious material, albeit weighing mostly between 2 and 5 grams and only occasionally up to 100 grams, they were probably not restricted to a very small wealthy elite but used and seen more widely. The objects and their images were thus probably a quite common presence.

As gold objects with detailed but enigmatic images and occasional runic inscriptions they attracted a lot of interest and since the beginnings of academic research in Scandinavian archaeology in the early 19th century they have been discussed extensively.²³

Already in the earliest publications their typology, seriation and chronology were the focus of attention and these remain areas of study.²⁴ They can be dated between the second half of the 5th and the first third of the 6th century.²⁵ The images are characterised by a small number of different motifs that appear in long series with stylistic variations. In 1869 the Swedish archaeologist Oskar Montelius already suggested a classification according to their motifs into five groups, A, B, C, D and F, a division that proved to be reliable and is still used despite a significant increase in numbers over the last 150 years.²⁶ This observation shows that the now known finds are a fairly representative sample.²⁷

20 Hines 1989, 197–199.

21 Crawford 2004, 90.

22 Behr 2010, 77–80.

23 Behr 2011a.

24 Thomsen 1855; Axboe 2004; Pesch 2007.

25 Axboe 2004, 273–275.

26 Montelius 1869, before Pl. 2.

27 Malmer 1963, 183–185.



Fig. 2: A-bracteate from Broholm, Funen, Denmark (IK 47,2), 4:1, diameter 30 mm x 2 (drawing: H. Lange).

A-bracteates show an anthropomorphic head in profile in the succession of the portraits of Roman emperors on late Roman medallions and aurei from the Constantinian period.²⁸ On the A-bracteate from Broholm, Funen (IK 47,2, **Fig. 2**) it is still possible to recognise behind the second head among the imitation of a Latin inscription the letters TANSPFAUC, that refer to emperor Constans (337–350).²⁹ The Roman imperial heads were adopted and the iconography was gradually adapted. Occasionally animals and symbols were added. The Latin letters were imitated or replaced with runic inscriptions.³⁰

Roman coins and medallions that had been fashioned as jewellery, looped and sometimes framed, have been found quite frequently in find spots outside the Ro-

28 Axboe 2007, 67–70.

29 [CONS]TANS P[IVS] F[ELIX] AUG[USTUS].

30 Düwel 2011, 478–487; Heizmann 2011.

man empire.³¹ Thus the adoption of the imperial image into pendants was already familiar and these coin-pendants may have served as models for the bracteates. It is noteworthy, however, that in contrast to their Roman models the heads on the bracteates lack any individuality and were not appropriated for the representation of local rulers.³²



Fig. 3: A-bracteate from Torpsgård/Senoren, Bleking, Sweden (IK 354) with traces of earlier bending, 4:1, diameter 71,8mm x 2 (Photo: U. Bruxe, Historiska museet, Stockholm).

31 Bursche 2001; Morrison – Bendall, 2012, 217.

32 Pesch 2007, 383.



Fig. 4: B-bracteate from Skrydstrup, Jutland, Denmark (IK 166), 4:1, diameter image area 23 mm x 2 (Photo: J. Lee, Nationalmuseet, Copenhagen).

The symbols of political and military power that characterised the late Roman imperial image like the diadem and the military coat with the brooch on the shoulder were retained in the new images (**Fig. 3**).

B-bracteates are characterised by one, two or three anthropomorphic figures that are again sometimes accompanied by animals, symbols and short inscriptions (**Fig. 4**).



Fig. 5: C-bracteate from Funen, Denmark (IK 58), 4:1, diameter 37 mm x 2 (Photo: L. Larsen, Nationalmuseet, Copenhagen).

The models for some of these representations were the reverses of Roman coins.³³

C-bracteates form the largest group with over 440 pendants. Here again the anthropomorphic head is shown in profile but now together with a quadruped animal that is placed underneath the head (**Fig. 5**). Again, additional animals, especially birds, symbols and inscriptions were sometimes added. On some C-bracteates the symbols of imperial power are still kept, other representations are abbreviated and less detailed.³⁴

³³ Hauck 2011a, 16–18.

³⁴ Hauck 2011b, 76–77.



Fig. 6: D-bracteate from Rivjeland, Rogaland, Norway (IK 487), 4:1, diameter 30,2 mm x 2 (Photo: T. Tveit, Arkeologisk museum, Stavanger).

D-bracteates, the second largest group feature no anthropomorphic figures but one or more intertwined animals. Only very rarely any letters were associated with this motif but sometimes additional symbols (**Fig. 6**). F-bracteates, constituting the smallest group, only show zoomorphic and no anthropomorphic features, the animals are not interlaced but resemble the animals on the C-bracteates.³⁵

35 In this paper I shall not refer to the D- and F-bracteates but only to those with anthropomorphic heads or figures.

Many attempts have been made to interpret the meaning of the bracteate images. The most wide-ranging and detailed iconological research in the tradition of Aby Warburg and Erwin Panofsky was conducted by Karl Hauck.³⁶ He included into his extensive analyses the archaeological, iconographical and literary contexts of the bracteate images and argued that it is possible to relate these 5th and 6th century images to mythical stories about Norse pre-Christian deities that had been written down centuries after the conversion to Christianity. He thus confirmed earlier interpretations that the images did not show mortals but deities. As the images are occasionally accompanied by inscriptions either imitating Latin letters or written in runes that can be read as magical formulas, he concluded that through image and script the bracteates functioned as protective amulets.³⁷ In his studies of the find spots he could recognise a recurrent pattern associating bracteates with central places.³⁸

More or less concurrent with the appearance of these golden pendants the surfaces of numerous other objects started to be decorated with zoomorphic and anthropomorphic motifs, in the so-called Nydam Style and Animal Style 1. Again, these decorations are characterised by long series of a few themes that are shown with some stylistic variations.³⁹ The iconography was derived from late Roman *Kerbschnitt* decoration on military equipment like belt buckles.⁴⁰ The decoration with figurative images on various objects was not a completely new phenomenon in 5th century Scandinavia. Still, from previous centuries only very few objects with any figurative decorations are known from this region. They were either imports from the Roman empire or locally made images that had been inspired by Roman models.⁴¹ They remained singular attempts and did not lead to the endless repetition of the motifs on the surfaces of dress accessories, jewellery, drinking vessels or weapons that can be observed from the 5th century onwards.

This rather sudden increase in pictorial decorations has been correlated with the profound social and political transformations within Scandinavian societies that can be observed in the substantial changes in the archaeological record. Foremost among the changes are shifts in the settlement structure with the emergence of a new type of settlement that differed from the majority of settlements that had been characterised by agricultural activities.⁴² In these new so-called central places the material

36 Among the 60+ studies see Hauck 1986; 1988; 2011a and b; summaries in Pesch 2007, 39–43; Behr 2011a, 220–229.

37 Hauck 1998.

38 Hauck 1992.

39 Høiland Nielsen 2012; Pesch 2012, 650–661.

40 Pesch 2012, 646–648.

41 Pesch 2012, 638–645; Blankenfeldt 2015.

42 Steuer 2007, 894–903; Høiland Nielsen 2014.

culture was characterised by exceptional and rich finds, evidence for regional and supra-regional trade, and different craft activities including precious-metal working.

Among the particularly well researched sites are Gudme on Funen, Uppåkra in Scania and Sorte Muld on Bornholm.⁴³ These sites existed for many centuries before they were abandoned but their finds are particularly rich for the period between the 5th and 7th centuries suggesting more than local significance and influence. Numerous hoards with bracteates have been discovered in and close to these central places.⁴⁴ Other outstanding features include unusually large hall buildings with finds that suggest ritual activities.⁴⁵ The archaeological evidence has been interpreted as the material expression of a new social and political elite that had emerged in the periphery of but close connection with the Roman empire. Contacts with the Roman world stimulated an increase in trade and production, gave access to Roman luxury goods that enabled their conspicuous display and offered new professional choices through service in the Roman army.⁴⁶ The distribution of finds in the central places and their hinterland indicate that some people in these places were in control economically and politically. In addition, objects that have religious connotations like the gold bracteates or the slightly later small gold foils, clusters of place-names in their vicinity that refer to deities, sanctuaries or sacrifices, and the hall buildings with evidence for sacrifices point to a pivotal role of these places in the relationship with another world as well.⁴⁷

The study of pre-Christian Norse religion is traditionally based on the late, 13th century, written sources with their mythological stories about a supernatural world. These mythical narratives tended to be interpreted as written versions of an earlier oral tradition of the stories. However, as Pernille Hermann recently pointed out again oral narrations are profoundly transformed in the process of being fixed in a written format.⁴⁸ Before literacy was introduced in northern Europe in the wake of the Christian conversion “[...] the spoken word, runic inscriptions, artifacts, pictures, and ritual and bodily performances existed as parallel media, equally responsible for the mediation and transmission of myths.”⁴⁹ In these different media the mythical stories varied, they changed and were adapted when they were retold and listeners or viewers related to them in different ways. That is why it is only occasionally possible to correlate mythical stories that have been transmitted in different media.⁵⁰

43 Nielsen et al. 1994; Larsson – Hårdh 1997; Hårdh 2003; Adamsen et al. 2008; Hedeager 2002.

44 Hauck 1992; Pesch 2011.

45 Larsson – Lenntorp 2004; Andrén 2005, 112–113; Larsson 2007; Jørgensen 2011, 83–85.

46 Storgaard 2003; Grane 2013.

47 Hauck 1992; Hedeager 2002.

48 Hermann 2017.

49 Hermann 2017, 40.

50 See for example, Oehrl 2015.

Increasingly archaeological finds and observations are used to identify religious objects, ritual behaviour and the world-views underpinning them despite the considerable methodological difficulties in recognising them as such in circumstances where religious acts may have permeated many activities in daily life.⁵¹ The material evidence is also investigated to gain a better understanding of social and regional variations, the static or changeable nature of religious expressions and the impact of outside influences.⁵² The novelty of figurative images on gold bracteates but also on objects decorated in animal style 1 and the almost simultaneous appearance of these objects in many different sites has been interpreted as evidence for religious change that happened under Roman influence and which led to a cosmology that was widely shared among local elites over a wide area.⁵³

It is unknown who wore and deposited bracteates, men and/or women, only members of a small elite or ‘commoners’ as well, still it can be argued that these prestigious decorated objects may have functioned as symbols of social status or objects within gift-exchanges.⁵⁴ Bracteates are thus explained as objects with potency within social relationships but also within the relationships with a supernatural sphere.

The Visual Impact of Gold Bracteates

So far, bracteates have been discussed as objects that reflect the social, political and religious changes in Scandinavian societies that can be observed in the archaeology of the central places. However, a discussion of their visuality and their visual impact on their contemporary viewers can demonstrate that bracteates and their images may have functioned as active agents in these transformations.

There is no explanation for the observation that at a certain point in time in the 5th century people felt the need to create anthropomorphic images of divine beings in gold and in large numbers, images that could be worn on portable objects close to the body. Still, the visibility of the divine in anthropomorphic shape changed the relationship with the other world. The divine became not only visible but through its material reality it also became tangible. This material presence demanded a new relationship with it. The viewers experienced personal confrontations with the divine through the gaze at the image. Representing the divine thus intensified its reality.

A significant detail of the anthropomorphic but also zoomorphic representations on the bracteates are the over-sized carefully drawn eyes. Whilst the eyes on the

51 Jennbert 2011, 17–31; Andrén 2011, 849–855.

52 Jennbert 2000, 129–130; Andrén 2011, 849.

53 Hedeager 2005, 504–514.

54 Gaimster 2001; Hedeager 2005, 514–517.

Roman imperial heads that served as models were always in profile, hence looking either to the right or left, the eyes of the anthropomorphic and zoomorphic heads on the bracteates were always shown *en face*, thus ‘looking’ at the viewers. As the images on many bracteates were designed with great artistic skill it is not likely that this change was due to the inability of whoever made the image to draw an eye in profile but it was more probably a deliberate modification. Through the gaze of the eye, the image was interacting with the viewers, communicating directly with them, requesting a response.

Bredenkamp discussed the look of the eyes that are represented in a picture and ‘look out’ of the image as an “intrinsic image act”.⁵⁵ Despite being the one who gazes at the picture, the viewer believes to be looked at which intensifies the relationship. The bracteate images with beings in human and animal shapes watching are thus not inert metal but actively engaging with viewers.

This immediate connection that was created through the exchange of looks between the represented and the viewer was also mediating between the inside of the image, its imaginary space, and the outside of the viewer, the real world. The different sphere of the bracteate representation was further demarcated through the framing of the image either with simple lines or with one or more decorated zones that surround the image. In their recent discussion of the role of frames in ancient art Verity Platt and Michael Squire discussed them as physical but also conceptual boundaries.⁵⁶ They point to the role of these demarcations in delineating visual fields and in categorising spaces but also as liminal zones that interfere both with the spaces inside the image and outside of it.⁵⁷ Thus it can be argued that the frames on the bracteates too both confine a different imaginary sphere but also relate it to the outside space of the viewer.

Roman objects with images had reached northern Europe for several centuries without stimulating the design and manufacture of many images locally.⁵⁸ Divine forces or deities may have been visible and perceptible in nature at specific points in the landscape, or in rituals or in performances. However, the scarcity of any anthropomorphic representations before the 5th century makes it unlikely that deities did ‘exist’ visually and materially in human shape apart from highly stylised wooden figurines that have been discovered in wetlands.⁵⁹ When the Roman imperial head was adopted on the gold pendants the widely held view of the apotropaic power that had been assigned to the imperial portraits on the Roman coins was probably well

55 Bredenkamp 2015, 231–245.

56 Platt – Squire 2017.

57 Platt – Squire 2017, 47.

58 Blankenfeld 2015.

59 an der Sanden – Capelle 2001.



Fig. 7: Gold medallion of Theoderic (493/526), 4:1, diameter 33 mm x 2 (Photo: Palazzo Massimo alle Terme, Rome).

known in the north.⁶⁰ This knowledge of its protective function may have facilitated the gradual adaptation into images of a deity.

It is most likely that the significance of details in the Roman imperial portraits were well understood in northern Europe. That means that the deity became visually associated with emblems of power, the diadem and the military coat that was held together by a large shoulder brooch. Both were symbols indicating political rulership and military leadership. The perception of the deity's role as leader was reinforced by later bracteate designs where in addition to the Roman symbols, local signs of authority were added.

⁶⁰ Maguire 1997; Williams 2007, 157–158; Morrison – Bendall 2012, 218.

On the C-bracteate from Funen (IK 58, **Fig. 5**) the head is shown not only with the Roman diadem but also with the long hair that was typical for rulers from the Germanic world as, for example, the portraits of king Childeric I, who died in 481, on his signet ring, or of king Theoderic, who died in 526, on a gold coin (**Fig. 7**) shows.⁶¹

Another visual link was created through the imitation of the letters that accompanied the imperial head. Thus the deity became connected with writing and script, even if the letters could not be deciphered. In a society largely without any writing, apart from brief runic inscriptions, writing was a technique that was imbued with magical connotations.⁶²

The imperial image was not merely copied but altered with the addition of a limited range of symbols and anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figures. They were probably selected in a complex interplay between the possibilities this new visual medium offered and existing ideas and stories. In a process of artistic borrowings, selective appropriations and creative imagination narratives were developed and given a visual reality. In particular, quadrupeds and birds were included that created and reinforced the recurring association of a deity in human shape with these animals. Through the repetition and lack of variations these associations became standardised and normative for the perception of the deity.

The main deity of the bracteates has been identified as the god Odin who is well known from the late written sources as a god of war and death but also poetry, writing, magic and healing.⁶³ As the protagonist in the mythical stories he is often accompanied by his various animal companions. The earliest mention of Odin was in the late 1st century AD in Tacitus' work *On the origin and the situation of the Germans* (ch. 9). Tacitus, however labelled the gods in the *interpretatio Romana* with Roman names, among them Mercury. Even if the Roman god Mercury had little apparent similarities with the god Odin as known from the texts of the 13th century, the link between them is also attested by the name of the weekday that is Wednesday (derived from Woden/Odin) in English in the Germanic tradition and *mercredi* (derived from Mercury) in French in the Latin tradition.⁶⁴ Whilst it is uncertain how reliable Tacitus' knowledge about the Germans and their customs was, it is noticeable that he did not mention any mythical stories connected to Mercury in contrast to some of the other gods he referred to but he only reported that he was given human sacrifices (Tac. *Germ.* 9). Richard North even suggested that Odin was

61 Axboe 2007, 100–103; Diesenberger 2003.

62 Düwel 2011, 512–523.

63 Odin is the main god of Eddic poetry, for a summary of the mythical stories related to him, see Davidson 1993, 76–79.

64 Abram 2011, 55.

only introduced when the cult of the Roman god Mercury spread northwards into the Roman provinces and beyond.⁶⁵

The bracteate images of the 5th and 6th centuries are interpreted as the earliest visual depictions of the god. This interpretation is based on the one hand on a correlation between characteristics and deeds of the god as they were narrated in the late written texts and details of the images and on the other hand on iconographic comparisons with Roman images that may have influenced the designs, any alterations and additional details.⁶⁶ The underlying, usually unspoken, assumption of these interpretations is that the new images depicted a deity *as* it existed already in an imagined and invisible presence in an oral or performative sphere. It is, however, far more likely that the imperial portraits only created the visual appearance of the deity, gave it shape and presence. Through its attributes the images became formative for the way in which the deity was perceived and imagined.

The images set new norms of seeing and relating to the divine by making it visible in human shape. Hence the pictures changed the imagined vision of the deity. The correlation with certain recurring visual features, like symbols of power, script and animals, reinforced the perception of a deity with particular characteristic attributes.

Thus the late characterisations of Odin as ruler and warrior, as discoverer of the runes or as being accompanied by helping animals may originate in the attributes of the bracteate designs as they had been derived and further developed from the Roman imperial portraits. This understanding of images as practices that were formative for the imagination and the expectations of the adherents may also have led to new ways to address and communicate with the divine.

Nothing is known about the uses of bracteates before they were deposited and it is also unknown who buried the golden objects. That is why it must remain hypothetical to argue that the visualisation of the divine and the changing relationship with it may have caused a stronger personal bond that called for a more individualised form of ritual. It has long been observed in the archaeological record that ritual behaviour changed in southern Scandinavia in the 5th century.⁶⁷ The large communal deposition sites in wetlands that had been visited repeatedly often over very long periods of time were abandoned in the later 5th century.⁶⁸ At the same time small sacrificial hoards containing precious metal objects, frequently including bracteates, started to be deposited in wet and in dry places.⁶⁹ Many of the find spots were close

65 North 1997, 78–79.

66 Hauck 2011a; Andrén 2005, 128–129; 2011, 851.

67 Fabech 1991.

68 Ilkjær 2003; Hultgård 2003, 453; Andrén 2005, 129–130.

69 Hines 1989, 194–199; Fabech 2003.

by or in the central places. It is not uncommon to observe among the more recent bracteate finds which had been buried in hoards that they had been folded or bent before their deposition⁷⁰ (**Fig. 3**). Older finds may have also been folded but were unfolded without keeping a record of it. It is not known when this deliberate hiding of the image or its distortion took place, be it as part of its deposition or be it earlier, but it seems to be significant that something was done to the image and the object.

No workshop in which gold bracteates have been made has yet been identified. However, access to gold, knowledge and understanding of the sophisticated iconography and the runes and the necessary skills of the craft people were most likely found in the central places. That bracteates were not made in one place and distributed from there is indicated by distinct regional stylistic features of the iconography, the framing wires and the loops. They were produced in different places. Alexandra Pesch defined clusters of bracteates that are stylistically so closely related that they could not have been made independently as ‘*Formularfamilien*’.⁷¹ In her detailed analysis of the distribution of bracteates in these *Formularfamilien* she could demonstrate that bracteates from different groups were exchanged between different central places in a close-knit network of relationships between people who commissioned and designed, may have owned, wore or gifted bracteates.⁷²

Even if it is not possible to describe in any detail the political, social or religious organisation of the central places or any of the mechanisms under which bracteates were designed and produced, their technical and thematic uniformity suggests some form of control over their manufacture. Still, copying a pictorial motif had no negative connotations in the early middle ages. To the contrary, the reproduction of an image increased the significance and influence of the idea it represented and thus its value.⁷³

It is noticeable that only in the peripheral areas of bracteate distribution untypical motifs or significant variations in the designs appear which may suggest weaker monitoring.⁷⁴

It clearly mattered to produce these pendants in large numbers which was possible through the use of bronze dies. Thus seeing the images became a common occurrence making the depictions of the deity recognisable and familiar. That is why it was not necessary to repeat all the details but abbreviated versions could serve the same purpose to generate the physical and visual presence. The evidence suggests

70 Behr 2010, 78.

71 Pesch 2007, 44–46.

72 Pesch 2007, 381–391.

73 Pesch 2007, 370–373.

74 See, for example, the small group of female representations on bracteates mainly from southern and central Germany, Pesch 2002; or examples with unusual iconographical details from Anglo-Saxon England, Behr 2010, 69–70; Behr 2011b.

that the new political and social elites which established themselves in the central places were using this new pictorial language.⁷⁵ Through control over the access to the gold and the intellectual and technical knowledge needed to make the bracteates they could not only control the pictorial representations and perceptions but also the material contact with the divine.

Conclusion

Instead of interpreting bracteates just as evidence reflecting changing religious, political and social circumstances they can be explained as active agents in the processes that contributed to the development of a new cosmology and new forms of religious rituals.

Using a theoretical framework for the study of bracteate images that is based on an understanding of images as practices exerting agency that affected their viewers and their world-views through visual means it is possible to argue that these images set new norms of seeing, perceiving and relating to a divine presence. For a limited period of time in 5th and 6th century northern Europe bracteates and their images made through their visuality and materiality the divine visible and tangible. They could act as a medium to communicate mentally and physically with another world. Through the image humans could interact with the divine. The visual norms they set were reaffirmed through the frequent repetitions of the motifs and the probably wide-spread existence of the pendants. With the standardisation of the images, the underlying ideas and myths could be standardised and controlled as well. In a situation of political and social transformations when a new political elite emerged and established itself, it was probably worthwhile to have a new visual medium to communicate with the transcendent but also have authority over the appearance and perceptions of this other world.

75 Hauck 1992; Hedeager 2002.

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