Context analysis and bracteate inscriptions in light of alternative iconographic interpretations

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Although nearly 1000 Scandinavian Migration Period (fifth- and sixth-century) gold pendants called bracteates have been discovered in Scandinavia and throughout northern and central Europe, only about twenty percent of these objects have inscriptions. The writing is mostly in the elder futhark but also in corrupted Latin copied from inscriptions on Late Roman coins and medallions, which are presumably the models for bracteate imagery. Relatively few of the 170 bracteates with runic inscriptions—which are known from only 110 different dies (Düwel 2008: 46)—are semantically meaningful.

While the research of the late Karl Hauck has dominated bracteate scholarship for the past forty years, his theory of bracteate iconography is not the only possible interpretation of this imagery that may illuminate our understanding of the inscriptions. In this paper, I will highlight other interpretations of bracteates, not as definitive answers to the meaning of bracteates but instead to emphasize the tenuous nature of all such theories. I also propose the use of what Michaela Helmbrecht (2008) has termed 'context analysis' to focus on the various contexts in which bracteates have been discovered in order to shed additional light upon their meaning. Before presenting alternate explanations, I will review basic information about bracteates and their inscriptions, and I will summarize the basic tenets of Hauck's thesis.

Bracteate classification and iconography

From the earliest research on bracteates, scholars including C. J. Thomsen (1855), Oscar Montelius (1869), and Bernhard Salin (1895) focused on organizing these artifacts by classifying them into types according to details of images depicted in the central stamped field of decoration. Although bracteates were classified into Types A–H, Montelius (1869) recognized that Types A through D plus Type F are the ones that date to the Migration Period of the fifth through sixth centuries A.D., whereas others are later. Type A comprises bracteates with a man's head, Type B includes standing human figures, Type C shows a man's head and a horse-like animal, Type D has a dragon-like animal, and Type F has a horse-like animal but no human. Further refinements to bracteate groupings were made by Mogens B.Mackeprang (1952), but the basic division of the Migration Period bracteates continues to be used, even in the most recent corpus of bracteates as presented by Karl Hauck (IK 1,1–3,2).

Besides classification, the other major concern of bracteate scholarship has been identification of the figures depicted on these objects. Interpretation often depends upon analysis of texts from Late Antiquity or the later medieval period, in particular Old Norse Eddic and saga material (e.g. Beck 2001). Karl Hauck identified the major figure depicted on bracteates as Odin, based on what he called *Kontext-Ikonographie*, by which he looked at pictures not in isolation but by considering inscriptions, later texts, place-names, image traditions, archaeology, and motif details such as figure attributes and gestures (Hauck 1975). He proposed a unified system of bracteate iconography centered around healing practices and the god Odin, using the tenth-century Old High German second Merseburg charm as a key source (Hauck 1970). He claimed that images on Type C bracteates were the pictorial equivalent of the second Merseburg charm concerning Odin healing the hoof of Balder's foal, which he recognizes in the bent hind leg of the horse-like animal on bracteates. Other details central to his argument include identifying depictions of the healing breath of Odin blowing into the ear of Balder's foal on Type C bracteates (Hauck 1980) and connecting the *Drei-Götter* Type B bracteates with three standing human figures with the death of Balder (Hauck 1998a). He also linked the images on a small group of Type F bracteates, which do not include human figures, to his interpretations of Odin on Types A, B, and C (Hauck 1986). These identifications are not unquestioned, as I will examine below.

Bracteate inscriptions

Four of the bracteate types—A, B, C, and F—include some pieces with inscriptions, although none of the Type D bracteates, which are later, display any runes. These inscriptions, which were made as part of the die used to stamp these one-sided disks, contrast with inscriptions on fibulae and other portable objects, which could have been incised at any time after the production of the piece. Krause's (1966) division of bracteate inscriptions into "magic" and "runemaster" groups is still the basis for categorization of these inscriptions, even though his group of "magic" inscriptions (including *alu*, *auja*, *ehwu*, *laukaz,* and *laþu*) has been updated and renamed "formula" or "charm" inscriptions. The "charm" and "runemaster" inscriptions, along with "futhark" inscriptions, comprise the majority of the readable bracteate inscriptions. Klaus Düwel (2008) has further divided Krause's "runemaster" group into "divine runemaster" and "mortal runemaster" types. His interpretations follow Hauck's iconographic identification and he regards Odin as the divine runemaster. Bracteates that are difficult to interpret according to Hauck's model are considered problematic and are usually relegated to the "mortal" group.

The inscription on two bracteates from Køge (KJ 127 Seeland II; IK 1,2, no. 98) is crucial to understanding the amuletic character of bracteates since part of the inscription reads **gibuauja**, "I give luck" (Düwel 2008; Hauck 1998b). In addition, interpretation of the runic inscription **houaʀ**, "the High One", on a bracteate from Fünen (KJ 119 Fünen I; IK 1,2, no. 58) as a reference to Odin is key to Hauck's iconography. However, nowhere on bracteates or in any other inscriptions in the elder futhark is Odin or any other god specifically named (Antonsen 2002: 14). It has been argued that there may have been an injunction against naming a god's name, yet it is difficult to build an argument from the absence of a name. Other runic readings that seem more secure than **houaʀ** include Wilhelm Heizmann's (1987) (and others') interpretation of the placement of **laukaʀ**, "leek" on several bracteates due to the plant's protective and fertility characteristics suitable for healing Balder's horse as depicted on Type C bracteates according to Hauck's thesis. A more vulnerable interpretation is Düwel and Heizmann's (2006) suggestion that the *futhark* on bracteates should be understood as a medium for communicating with Odin. Yet Odin is never named on bracteates, so it is difficult to assert that the runes were carved into a bracteate die specifically to communicate with this god. Despite the counter argument that Odin's name could not be inscribed, the argument is still circular.

Other interpretations of bracteate iconography

In the early years of bracteate scholarship, many theories concerning the identification of motifs on bracteates were put forward, including Worsaae (1870) and Salin (1895), who identified the figure with the four-legged horned animal on Type C bracteates as Thor with his goat. Hauck's iconography has been promulgated widely and overshadows other suggestions. However, in recent years, several scholars have questioned Hauck's iconographic scheme, while others have augmented it or mitigated it by calling for a multivalent interpretation of bracteate iconography.

Edgar Polomé (1994) was one of the first to question openly Hauck's identification of the unnamed god on bracteates as Odin. He also warned that Loki's supposed involvement with Balder's death was a late development in Nordic mythology, dependent upon contact with Christianity, so that Balder and Loki would not be depicted on the fifth- and sixth-century *Drei-Götter* bracteates as identified by Hauck. Kathleen Starkey (1999) also casts doubt upon Hauck's interpretation of the central figure on bracteates as Odin and finds Hauck's designation of Odin as a healing god problematic. Many details of Hauck's iconographic interpretation are questioned, in particular why one bird is typically shown on bracteates rather than two birds, as would be expected to represent Odin's two ravens.

Lotte Hedeager (e.g. 1997, 1999) agrees with Hauck that Odin is represented on bracteates, but she interprets these objects as evidence of Odinic shamanism rather than as healing magic seen through the lens of the second Merseburg charm. She proposes that bracteate images depict Odin as a shaman riding to the Other World with his raven helping-spirits (even though only one bird is depicted on most bracteates). She identifies shamanism generally in animal-

style ornament and specifically in bracteate imagery, representing ecstasy and a journey to the Other World (Hedeager 1999).

Johan Adetorp (2008) departs entirely from Hauck's interpretation, analyzing bracteates against a background of Celtic imagery. Rather than identifying specific Celtic gods and myths on bracteates, he draws from the common background of the Celtic and Germanic worldview, thus looking to earlier material to analyze bracteate imagery instead of later Old Norse material as Hauck and his associates have done. Adetorp recognizes both fertility and earth symbolism in bracteates and views Type C bracteates as sun-amulets, an explanation already offered by Carl-Axel Moberg (1952) for bracteates with border designs that radiate outward from the center.

Other scholars have turned to classical and ancient Near Eastern models for clues to the meaning of bracteate imagery. Over half a century before Hauck's identification of Odin on bracteates, Sune Ambrosiani (1907) linked images of the Emperor as a god on Roman coins and medallions to the head on bracteates. He identified both the man's head on Type A bracteates and the head over the horse-like animal on Type C bracteates as Odin. Anders Kaliff, an archaeologist, and Olof Sundqvist, a historian of religions, trace similarities between the Mithras and Odin cults in bracteate iconography (Kaliff and Sundqvist 2004). They suggest that the Iron Age Scandinavian cult of Odin was affected when it came into contact with the worship of Mithras among Roman soldiers in the Roman provinces. Specific groups of bracteates have been examined by others, including Gunilla Åkerström-Hougen (2001) who traces the Roman *adventus* scene, which shows the arrival of the emperor on coins and medallions, to Type B bracteates of the type known in numismatics as "Victory crowning the Victor" and called the *Drei-Götter* bracteates by Hauck. Åkerström-Hougen explores the transformation of the imperial standard crowned by an eagle into a northern bird and an enigmatic T-shape on bracteates. Looking farther afield for models, Søren Nancke-Krogh (1984) investigates a small homogeneous group of Type C bracteates and derives the bird-appendage on the man's hair (or helmet) from a Sassanian motif known through Eastern copies of Roman coins and medallions.

Another direction is taken by several authors who focus the role of gender in bracteate iconography. Although most bracteate images represent men, these objects apparently were worn as pendant amulets by women, at least in England and on the Continent where they have been discovered *in situ* on the chest with beads and other pendants in female graves (Wicker 2005). Anders Andrén (1991) interprets bracteates as a political medium for runic-literate elite in Scandinavian and proposes that these objects distributed across Europe were used by women as a sign of Scandinavian identity to cement political alliances. Birgit Arrhenius (1995) suggests that bracteates were morning gifts given by husbands to their brides at the consummation of marriages, and that bracteates discovered in female burials on the Continent are evidence of exogamy among elites of Germanic Europe. Marta Lindeberg (1997) stresses the role of women not merely as passive participants but as facilitators of alliances and wealth exchange. She also addresses the question of why women would wear bracteates depicting men—in particular Odin—by tracing how Odin was relevant to women by linking runic inscriptions on bracteates to figures from Old Norse mythology.

Several writers examine the androgynous role of Odin in the practice of magic. Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson (1998) posits that women wore bracteates displaying images of Odin because he crossed genders to participate in the ritual called *sejd,* a shamanic ecstatic state. She also connects women to the Valkyries who serve Odin, suggesting that bracteates were given as gifts at diplomatic ceremonies in which elite women wore bracteates marking their role as hostesses. Gry Wiker (2001) discusses the blurring of borders between male and female and between human and animal in the *sejd* ritual as displayed on bracteates and other Iron Age objects. Martel (2007) proposes that Type B bracteates with a naked, bearded man represent the performance of *sejd*, associated not only with Odin in a gender-ambiguous role but also with women and the goddess Freyja. Kent O. Laursen (2006) examines this same group of Type B bracteates as symbols of an initiation rite that signifies gaining supernatural knowledge, paying special attention to extra-somatic symbols located around the figure of the man. Finally, Wiker (2008) posits the importance of the liminal position of the god Loki in the *Drei-Götter* group of Type B bracteates as symbolic of warrior initiation.

A multivalent view of interpretative possibilities is presented by Alexandra Pesch (2007). Although she was one of Hauck's students and accepts Hauck's Odin-centered view of brac-

teates, she proposes an almost postmodern view of contextual meanings, thus perhaps displaying a crack in the Hauckian dogma. She examines alternate understandings of Type C bracteate iconography from the disparate viewpoints of the Late Antique, Viking Age, Odin-religion, Tibetan culture, and Mithras cult. While all interpretations of bracteate iconography are not equally viable, we should consider how bracteates were developed within a milieu of the proliferation of multiple religious systems along with the expansion of the Roman Empire. Various interpretations of bracteates mirror a time of changing cult practices that can be traced on the basis of material practices. There is no firm evidence that Odin is the major god during the Migration Period, and when interpretations are based on the assumption that Odin is represented on bracteates, all readings then lead to Odin, whether justified or not. If we have pre-conceived notions, we tend to make inscriptions fit what we expect or hope to find, building up a house of cards.

Context-analysis of bracteates

Since bracteate images are highly stylized and simplified, and inscriptions are enigmatic, I propose that we employ context analysis, a methodology which Michaela Helmbrecht (2008) introduces to investigate depictions of supposed horned helmets in early medieval Scandinavian art. This method does not mean the same as Hauck's *Kontext-ikonographie* (Hauck, 1975; 2008: 33); on the contrary, the focus is on how images may have been used differently by different social groups. Kathryn Starkey (1999), who specifically questions Hauck's interpretation, has called for research on why bracteates were made rather than focusing only on identifying the figures depicted on them. Even Michael Enright in his encomium to the first volume of Hauck's corpus of bracteates suggests that:

> Might not some consideration be given to the social as well as to the religious reasons for wearing bracteates? ... an amulet not only says something about the religious beliefs of the wearer but may also say something noteworthy about social status and concepts of aristocratic display. It is an intriguing datum that many if not most of the wears for he golden amulets appear to have been women. Why? (Enright 1988, 504).

While Hauck focused on the religious meaning of bracteates and their inscriptions, there are multiple meanings of bracteates if one considers the various reasons why people wore them.

I have elsewhere proposed that not all bracteates were made by the same methods (Wicker 1998, 2006); likewise, not all were used in the same way. Similarly, we cannot assume that a "one-size-fits-all" approach to iconography and inscriptions is appropriate. Rather than focusing primarily on the desire to identify mythological figures on bracteates, we should try to understand the functions that bracteates and their images had in the society, considering how these objects were used as well as how and where they were deposited. It is possible that bracteates found in hoards in the heartland of southern Scandinavia may have been used differently from bracteates discovered in women's graves in far-away England and the Continent. Bracteates held meanings for those who wore them, not just religious meaning but also the social meaning of the object as a carrier of high status and a marker of age and gender. Through some mechanism that we do not yet comprehend, medallions that had been worn by men were transformed into bracteates worn by women (Wicker 2008: 245), and some bracteates may have been gendered female while others remained male. An elite Germanic woman could wear a gold bracteate that had an apparently masculine inscription and featured masculine imagery, presumably to express descent and political affinity, as Svante Fischer (2003) has proposed for Alemannic women.

It is also likely that bracteates were made, used, and regarded by individuals with varying levels of literacy, both active and passive. Bracteates with Latin inscriptions may have been used differently from those with only runes, and those with various inscriptions may have been used in different ways and by various sub-sets of the population. There are regional variations of favored motifs, with some being used for only a short period of time whereas others were in use much longer. It is easy to imagine that meanings changed over time. As Helmbrecht (2008: 33) points out, "pictorial representations in oral societies are a special

form of tradition, which should not be considered as a passive corpus of illustrations referring to knowledge and ideas already fixed in written form." The unified scheme of bracteate iconography revolving around Odin and healing as identified by Hauck is enticing, but I believe it is not sufficient to explain the use of images and inscriptions in the Migration Period.

In the bracteate corpus, we witness inspiration, imitation, and transformation of an object type (from medallions to bracteates) through a change in imagery (from Roman to Germanic) and inscriptions (from Latin to runic), and even an alteration in the gendered use of the objects (from men to women). As Lisbeth Imer (2007: 81) has argued, early runic writing both contrasts with the Roman world yet also imitates it. So, too, bracteates became an important means of expressing Scandinavian identity and consciousness even though they were conceived within a milieu of Roman inspiration. To understand bracteate inscriptions, we must consider the objects in context.

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