

**Sonderdruck**

aus

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**WEIBLICHE ELITEN  
IN DER FRÜHGESCHICHTE**

**FEMALE ELITES IN PROTOHISTORIC EUROPE**

Internationale Tagung vom 13. bis zum 14. Juni 2008 im RGZM  
im Rahmen des Forschungsschwerpunktes »Eliten«

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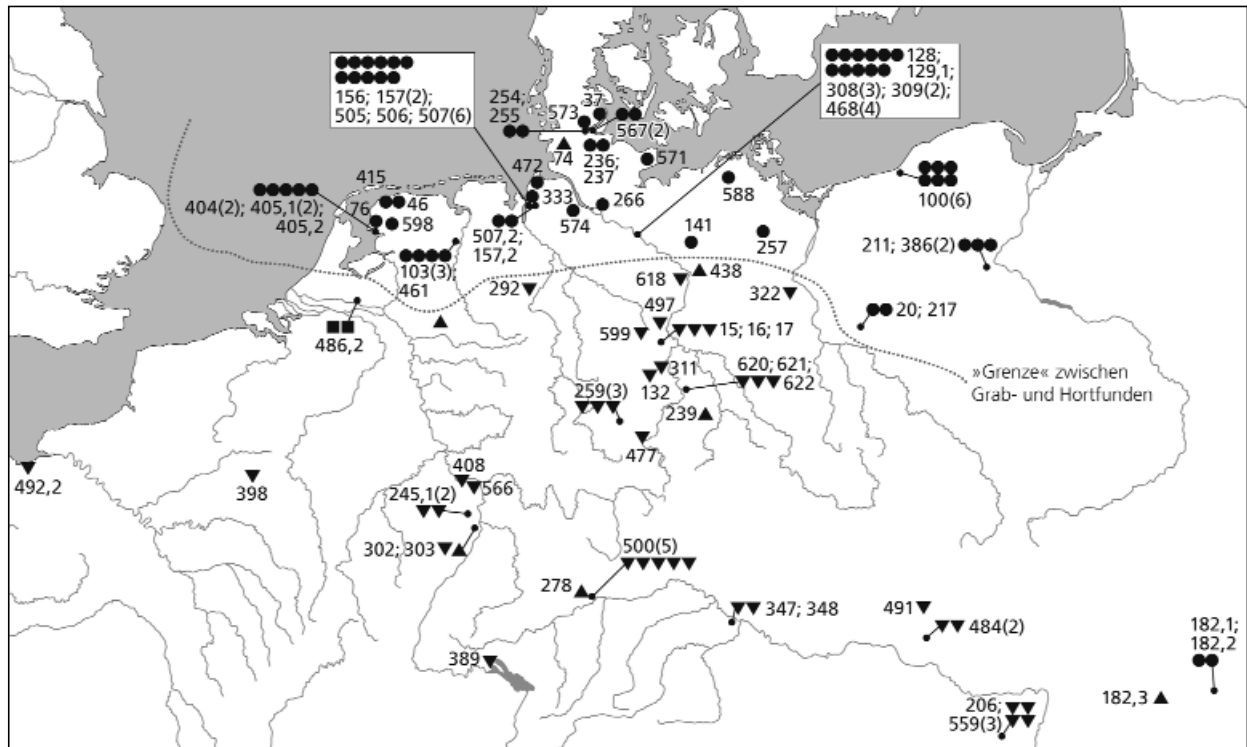
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## GOLD BRACTEATES AND FEMALE BURIALS

### MATERIAL CULTURE AS A MEDIUM OF ELITE COMMUNICATION IN THE MIGRATION PERIOD

Research on female elites in the Early Middle Ages should on no account exclude bracteates. First of all, these gold pendant amulets are a direct reflection of the female sphere in high-status material culture and, secondly, significant evidence of elite communication and political relationships during the Migration Period.

Gold bracteates are found throughout an area that stretches from Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Southeast England, the northern parts of the Netherlands, Germany and Poland to other parts of the Continent as far as the Danube and Tisza (Theiß) region. Two distinct zones can be determined. In Southern Scandinavia – the bracteates’ core area – and in some of the adjoining regions, the bracteates are nowadays found in hoards or as single finds; they can therefore often be considered as ritual deposits or as having been deliberately concealed. There are also – although, so far, relatively seldom – stray finds from settlements. By contrast, in England, on Gotland and in parts of Norway as well as in the central and southern parts of the Continent they are found in burials. This also applies to the Elbe/Saale region (the ancient kingdom of Thuringia), a small area in Rhineland-Palatinate and to the Danubian finds (fig. 1). The burial finds, espe-



**Fig 1** Map of Continental bracteates, numbered according to IK. – ● hoard or settlement finds; ▼ female graves; ■ male graves; ▲ unknown context or single find.



IK 407, 1



IK 418



IK 419, 1



IK 433



IK 454



IK 475



IK 477



IK 481



IK 487



IK 488, 1



IK 514

**Fig. 2** Examples of the D8 »Formular-familie« depicting a four-legged animal with a beak (griffin?) and a ribbon-shaped body. – (After Pesch 2007, 271ff.). – Scale = 2:1.

cially the Continental ones, will now be considered in greater detail because these »bracteate graves« are exclusively female burials – at least in the cases where gender can still be determined<sup>1</sup>.

Many of the Continental bracteates are later types from the final phase of the bracteate production which lasted from approximately AD 450 to c. 540/550<sup>2</sup>. The bracteates are usually found near the neck or thorax of the deceased and are often associated with glass beads, indicating that they were originally worn together, as necklaces, on chains or cords<sup>3</sup>. Also the Scandinavian bracteates must have been worn as necklaces, as indicated by the attached loops and the fact that they were found in hoards with beads or other pendants<sup>4</sup>. It would therefore seem that there was a direct connection between gold bracteates and women, not only on the Continent<sup>5</sup>.

## THE CONTINENTAL BRACTEATE FINDS

Nevertheless, the Continental finds (**tab. 1**) raise some special questions. Why were the bracteates worn so far in the South? What did they mean to the people at the time, and what do they say about their wearers? While Central and Southern Europe suffered the upheavals of the Migration Period, a culture flowered in the relatively untouched North that was not only distinguished by its great wealth of gold but also had invented runic script, skaldic poetry and Animal Style art. Its influence can be traced over a large area. The bracteates, too, are a category of finds invented in their Southern Scandinavian heartland, and most of the depicted images are derived from earlier images from that area.

Earlier research usually considered the Continental bracteates as having been imported from Scandinavia, explaining them either as gifts received from elite contacts or as the personal possession of Scandinavian women who had married men from the South as a result of international marriage politics<sup>6</sup>. This may be true in certain individual cases, but it is not true in general. Various detailed investigations have shown that the Continental pieces are often not as heavy as the Scandinavian bracteates, and that there are also other differences in the way they were made<sup>7</sup>. Consequently, they must be seen essentially as products of the region in which they were found. Bracteates were, therefore, not made in one specific centre and distributed from there over a wide area. Instead, they were produced at many different places, both within and outside Scandinavia.

At the same time, bracteates as a find category and as individual images bear witness to elite contacts in the Early Middle Ages within and with Scandinavia. Moreover, beyond such general statements, the individual images permit the identification of many direct lines of contact. These images have a certain relevance for this purpose – not in their meaning, but simply in the way they have been executed.

The apparent variety of bracteate images in general is reduced by the well-known fact that they can all be sorted into just five typological groups: A, B, C, D and F<sup>8</sup>. Indeed, it is reduced even further, beyond the limits of these groups, because the variability of the graphic details on many pieces is also extremely limited. Whole clusters of bracteates have almost identical images. They are variations on common basic designs, known in German (from Latin) as »Formulare«, i.e. »formulas« or patterns<sup>9</sup>. Such clusters of images made from closely related dies are therefore called »Formularfamilien« (»design families«)<sup>10</sup>. A good example is the D8-design family in type D of the bracteate typology (**figs 2-3**)<sup>11</sup> which shows a griffon-like animal with its head turned backwards and its ribbon-shaped body interlaced with the limbs. It is different from the other D-bracteates in that the shoulder end of the ribbon is a short straight connecting piece linked to the thigh of the animal. This then runs parallel to the edge of the image before bending towards the centre of the image to form the lower leg so that the three parts together resemble brackets. The members of a design family have clear similarities, not only in their motif but also in many of their graphic details, and

IK no.	locality/name	type	family	region	grave?
15	Aschersleben	A		Sachsen-Anhalt	yes
16	Aschersleben	A		Sachsen-Anhalt	yes
17	Aschersleben	C		Sachsen-Anhalt	yes
20	Zagórzyn (former »Beresina-Raum«)	B	1	woj. wielkopolskie/PL	
37	Büstorf	C	9a	Schleswig-Holstein	
46	Dokkum(?)	C	16	Friesland	
71	Hamburg	B	6	Hamburg	
74	Heide	B	4a	Schleswig-Holstein	yes
76	Wurt Hittum	A	7	prov. Friesland	
100	Körlin/Korlino	C	12	woj. Zachodniopomorskie/PL	
103	Landegge	C	16	Niedersachsen	
125	Region Mecklenburg	C		Mecklenburg-Vorpommern	
128	Nebenstedt (Gde. Dannenberg)	B	4	Niedersachsen	
129, 1	Nebenstedt (II), (Gde. Dannenberg)	B	4	Niedersachsen	
132	Obermöllern	B		Sachsen-Anhalt	yes
141	Penzlin	B		Mecklenburg-Vorpommern	
156	Sievern (Gde. Langen), Moosmoor	A	7	Niedersachsen	
157	Sievern (Gde. Langen), Moosmoor	C	16	Niedersachsen	
157, 2	Sievern III	C	16	Niedersachsen	
182, 1	Szatmár	C		kom. Szabolcs-Szatmár/H	
182, 2	Szatmár	C		kom. Szabolcs-Szatmár/H	
182, 3	Region Debrecen	C		kom. Hajdú-Bihar/H	
206	Várpalota	B		kom. Veszprém/H	yes
211	Wapno	C	6a	woj. wielkopolskie/PL	yes
217	Zagórzyn (former »Beresina-Raum«)	C	1	woj. wielkopolskie/PL	
232	Daxlanden-Brooch	B		Baden-Württemberg	yes
236	Region Eckernförde	C	1a	Schleswig-Holstein	
237	Region Eckernförde	C	13	Schleswig-Holstein	
239	Elstertrebnitz	A		Sachsen	yes
240	Erin	A		Westfalen	
245, 1	Freilaubersheim	B	11	Rheinland-Pfalz	yes
254	Geltorf (I) (?)	A		Schleswig-Holstein	
255	Geltorf (II) (?)	A		Schleswig-Holstein	
257	Golm	C	1a	Brandenburg	
259	Großfahner	B	7	Thüringen	yes
266	Hamfelde	A		Schleswig-Holstein	
278	Hohenmemmingen	B		Baden-Württemberg	yes
281	Raum Holstein	F	1	Schleswig-Holstein	
292	Liebenau	?		Niedersachsen	yes
302	Meckenheim	A		Rheinland-Pfalz	yes
303	Meckenheim	C	8	Rheinland-Pfalz	yes
308	Nebenstedt (Gde. Dannenberg)	B	3	Niedersachsen	
309	Nebenstedt (III) (Gde. Dannenberg)	F	1	Niedersachsen	
311	Oberwerschen	B	7	Sachsen-Anhalt	yes
322	Rosenthal	C		Berlin	yes
325	Schleswig?	C	12	Schleswig-Holstein	
333	Sievern (Gde. Langen), Büttel	B	3	Niedersachsen	
347	Straubing-Bajuwarenstraße	B		Bayern	yes
348	Straubing-Bajuwarenstraße	C		Bayern	yes
350	Southwest Germany(?)	B	7	Südwestdeutschland	
375	Hungary/Denmark (V)	C			
386	Wapno	C	14a	woj. wielkopolskie/PL	

Tab. 1 The Continental bracteate finds.

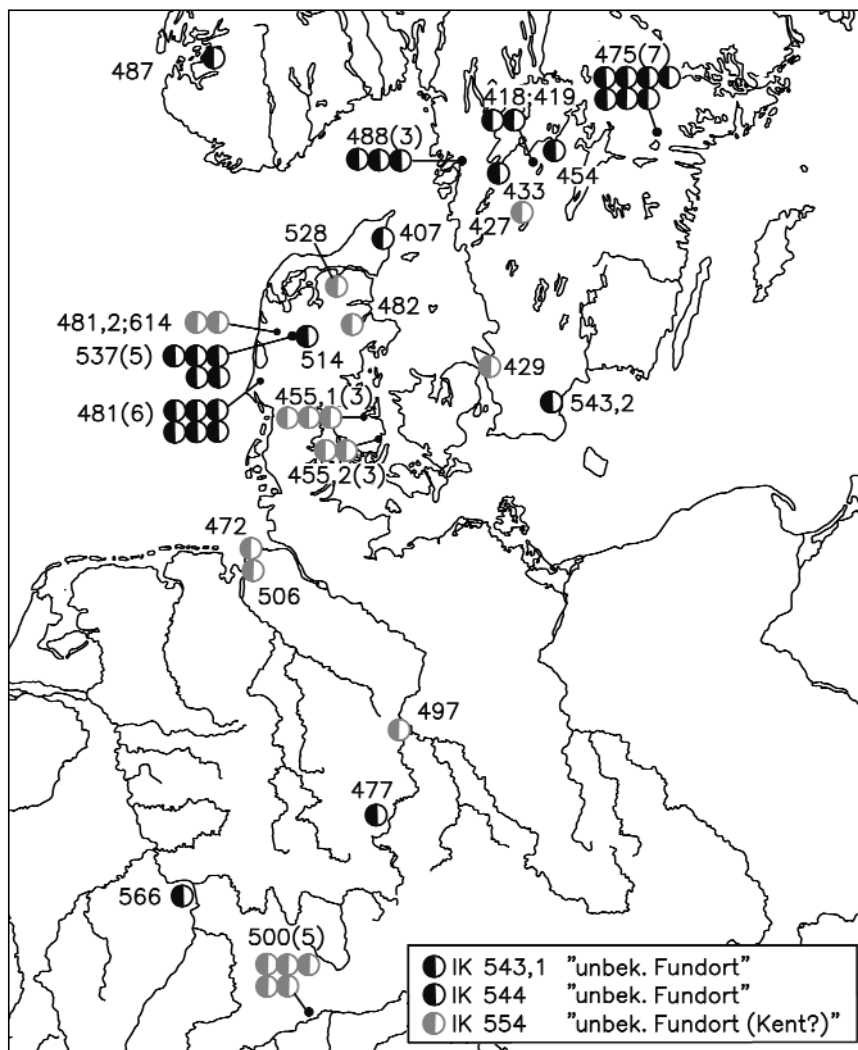
IK no.	locality/name	type	family	region	grave?
389	Welschingen	B	7	Baden-Württemberg	yes
398	Sablonnière	D		dép. Aisne/F	yes
404	Wurt Achlum	D	9	prov. Friesland/NL	
405, 1	Wurt Achlum	D	10a	prov. Friesland/NL	
405, 2	Wurt Achlum	D	10a	prov. Friesland/NL	
408	Bad Kreuznach	D		Rheinland-Pfalz	yes
415	Wurt Burmania	D	9a	prov. Friesland/NL	
438	Groß Lüben	D		Mecklenburg-Vorpommern	
440	Hérouvillette	D	10	dép. Calvados/F	yes
461	Landegge	D	9	Niedersachsen	
468	Nebenstedt (Gde. Dannenberg)	D	9	Niedersachsen	
472	Nordholz	D	8a	Niedersachsen	
477	Obermöllern	D	8	Sachsen-Anhalt	yes
484	Poysdorf	D		Niederösterreich	yes
486	Rhenen-Brakteatenbeschlag	D	9a	prov. Utrecht/NL	yes
491	Saratice	D		Mähren/CZ	yes
492, 2	Hérouvillette	D	9	dép. Calvados/F	yes
497	Schönebeck	D	8a	Sachsen-Anhalt	yes
500	Schretzheim	D	8a	Bayern	yes
505	Sievern (Gde. Langen), Moosmoor	D	9	Niedersachsen	
506	Sievern (Gde. Langen), Moosmoor	D	8a	Niedersachsen	
507	Sievern (Gde. Langen), Moosmoor	D	9	Niedersachsen	
507, 2	Sievern III	D	9	Niedersachsen	
559	Várpalota	D	14	kom. Veszprém/H	yes
566	Wörrstadt	D	8	Rheinland-Pfalz	yes
567	Wolfskrug	D		Schleswig-Holstein	
571	Boundary Dannau	C	15a	Schleswig-Holstein	
573	Schuby	A		Schleswig-Holstein	
574	Issendorf	B	7a	Niedersachsen	yes
588	Sukow	D	14	Mecklenburg-Vorpommern	
598	De Valom	C	16	prov. Friesland/NL	
599	Derenburg-Meerestieg II	B	6	Sachsen-Anhalt	yes
600	unknown findspot/estuary of the Oder(?)	C	7a	Odermündungsraum	
618	Altenzaun	D?		Sachsen-Anhalt	yes
619	Suchan, Stargard Szczecinski	C	14a	woj. Zachodniopomorskie	
620	Halle-Reideburg	D	1a?	Sachsen-Anhalt	yes
621	Halle-Reideburg	D	12	Sachsen-Anhalt	yes
622	Halle-Reideburg	D	4a	Sachsen-Anhalt	yes
623	Peins	D	1a?	prov. Friesland/NL	

**Tab. 1** Continuation.

thus in the overall variation of the basic image. They are variations on a theme, on a specific formula. The many similarities cannot be explained by the general conventions of the Animal Style, nor by constraints imposed by the motif or technical necessity. This means that individual images within a design family cannot have been created independently.

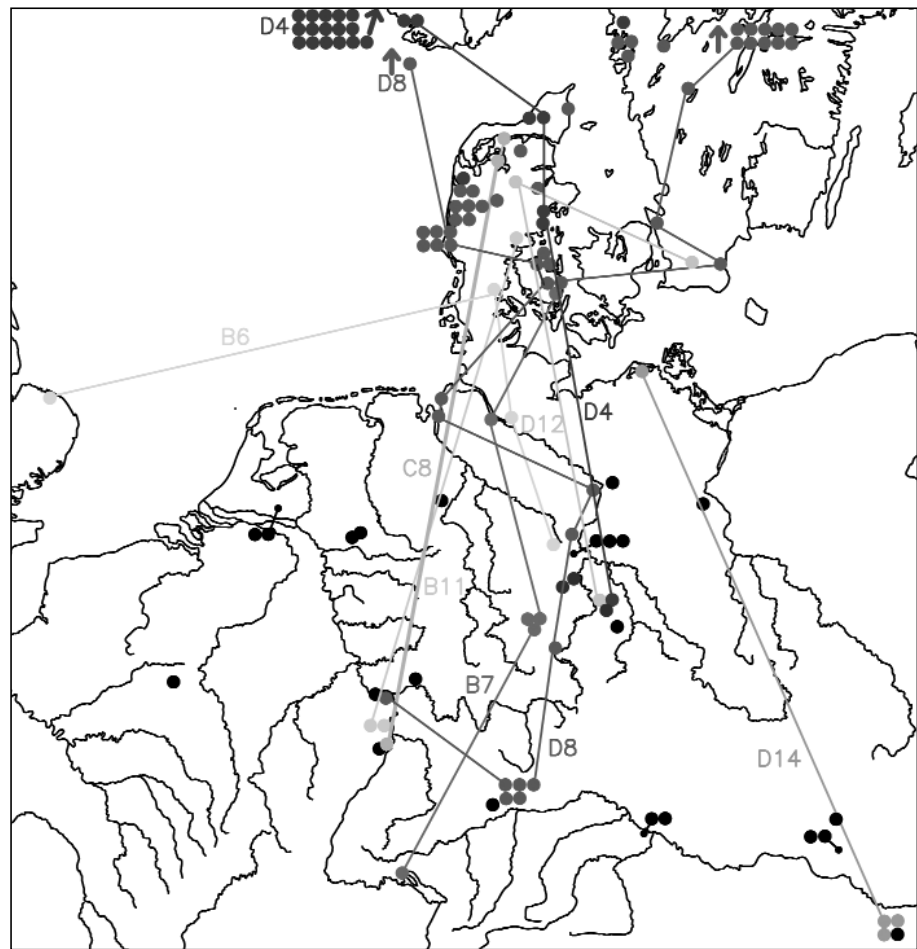
Similarity in their details is only possible because they were produced within a process of copying, from each other or from a common prototype. This is particularly remarkable because it would theoretically have been possible to mass-produce absolutely identical images with a single die<sup>12</sup>. The fact that about two-





**Fig. 3** Map of the findspots of the D8 design family.

thirds of all the bracteates known so far can be attributed to such design families shows that a decentralised copying process was the usual and desired method of distribution. Whether the production procedure itself had special significance, perhaps in connection with certain rituals, should be considered. Repeated copying often led to mistakes and signs of degeneration in the images<sup>13</sup>. Today, such phenomena help us to establish the direction of distribution of the images. Moreover, the region in which the original concept of a design family was born can sometimes be determined from the highest-quality and most detailed forms, while abbreviated forms mark the zones of the wider distribution. With these distribution zones plotted on a map, it can be seen that not all of the original concepts come from the same region<sup>14</sup>. Indeed, different regions (both in Scandinavia and in other bracteate zones) obviously introduced their own concepts into the exchange of copied images. Thus, in many places, not only prototypes were copied but also new elements developed. Nevertheless, it is important to note that all the craftsmen followed a common set of rules that went far beyond both the basic motifs and style I design details. The pool of images is limited: despite their apparent variety, the bracteates are, in fact, standardised in both motif and graphic design<sup>15</sup>.



**Fig. 4** Map of the Continental design families showing the iconographic links between Continental and other bracteates.

Behind this culture of standardised images, there were presumably concept originators and craftsmen who must have been in a very close, almost permanent exchange contact. It is very likely that they resided at central places or centres of wealth at the time, perhaps at Gudme/Lundeborg on Fünen, Sorte Muld on Bornholm or Uppåkra in Schonen<sup>16</sup>. Such places also must have existed on the Continent because a rapid and efficient distribution of the individual design families in several directions would only have been possible with a close network joining the places where the bracteates were produced<sup>17</sup>.

Examining the most closely related images among the Continental burial finds, several lines of contact can be observed (**fig. 4**). Theoretically, the various findspots of design-related bracteates mark the successive stages in the transfer of the copying process, although the finds are so thinly scattered on the Continent that there is always room for doubt. Nevertheless, it would seem that most of the links existed with Jutland and Fünen. Western Denmark appears to have been the main source of inspiration for Continental craftsmen.

Actually, this is hardly surprising. More remarkable is the fact that no links to the West have been observed. For example, there are no links with Kent<sup>18</sup> where richly appointed female burials with bracteates make the region very comparable to the Continent. There is also hardly any contact with the Baltic area. Individual regions with burials containing bracteates were obviously not linked to each other by a direct exchange of images; exchange always happened via the core region.



IK 259



IK 311



IK 350



IK 389



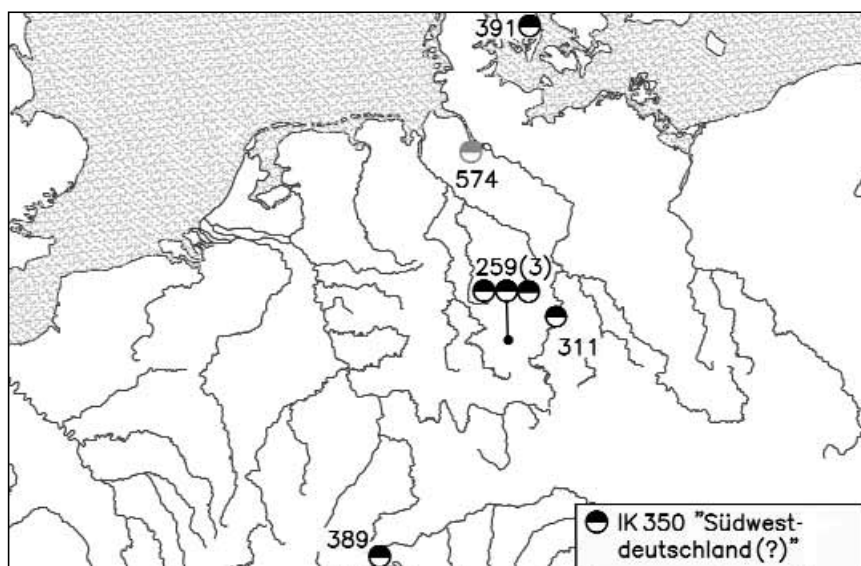
IK 391

**Fig. 5** The B7 design-family, the so-called female bracteates. – (After Pesch 2007, 1289). – Scale = 2:1.

If we consider the motifs and the distribution of the bracteate images, we find a totally different concept of art compared to today. In the Early Middle Ages, not just anyone was allowed to produce arbitrary images or convert ideas into some physical form. Instead, all the medieval find material shows how standardised and regulated art had been<sup>19</sup>. During the Migration Period, a strict set of rules – known today as Animal Style I – determined all the images created in Germania.

Copying techniques reveal a lot about the society in which they are used. If everyone participates in a common system of exchanging specific images and – *nota bene* – at the same time abstains from the production of other images, it can be concluded that these people are expressing their common bonds by the active copying and usage of these images. This is because images always also reflect a part of the identity of their owners: they illustrate certain aspects of how they view the world. This is even more true when it comes to such materially valuable objects as those bearing Animal Style images which were surely also seen as status symbols. The Animal Style is in some ways the »corporate design« of the elites in Germania who used these images to emphasise their own identity and dissociate themselves from other cultures. This is particularly true of the core region in Southern Scandinavia. At the edges of the distribution area, especially on the Continent, images from other traditions could also exert influence and thus give a new impetus to the Animal Style.

For the Continental women of the Migration Period wearing the bracteates and for these locally made objects, it means that if images of a Southern Scandinavian origin were copied on the Continent, it was an active expression of the conscious attachment to the original culture of the images. Adoption and exchange



**Fig. 6** Map of the findspots of the B7 design family. – (After Pesch 2007, 127).

of images are indeed a form of communication: communication through images. Zones of image exchange are areas of communication with many common social, political and religious features. The Continental women who wore the bracteates were members of this community.

### »FEMALE BRACTEATES«

It is not really possible to write about Continental women wearing bracteates without mentioning a small (but much debated) group of mainly Continental pieces known as »female bracteates« (fig. 5)<sup>20</sup>. These illustrate certain problems as well as some of the results of the bracteate research. They also suggest further sources of information on the subject of female elites.

Female bracteates are a group of seven images produced from five different dies. They belong to the so-called B7 design family that consists of IK 389 Welschingen and IK 350 from Southwestern Germany, IK 259 Großfahner (three lost images) and IK 311 Oberwerschen from the Saale area and, finally, the only Scandinavian find, IK 391 from Gudme on the Danish island of Fünen (fig. 6)<sup>21</sup>. They are type B-bracteates, each of them depicting, by definition, a complete human figure. In cases where the provenance is known, they come from burials; only the Danish find was part of a large hoard of bracteates<sup>22</sup>. All are variations on a forward-facing anthropomorphic figure with a complex coiffure. The frontal view of its large face is composed of six areas in relief. These areas make up a long triangular nose, lens-shaped eyes, an oval chin, and approximately triangular cheeks without contour lines<sup>23</sup>. The hairstyle is complex, with strands of hair sticking out upwards. It is often subdivided by a headband made of lines and/or rows of dots, with jewel-ribbons (*pendilia*) hanging from each end. Two knobby sections in high relief indicate the shoulder and breast area<sup>24</sup> from which half-raised, bent arms extend. The fingers of the right hand of the central figure point towards the edge of the image. Torso and legs are foreshortened, and vertical stripes suggest a knee- or ankle-long skirt or apron. In three cases, there are vertical shapes both to the left and the right (legs of a chair or throne)<sup>25</sup>. In the right hand of the central figure on three of the dies there is a rod-like object which in two cases is accentuated by a cross at the top. In four cases, the left arm extends into a rod or



**Fig. 7** Byzantine depiction of the Annunciation with Mary spinning. Phalera or fibula, 6<sup>th</sup>/7<sup>th</sup> century. – (Drawing P. Haefs, after Ellmers 1971). – Scale = 1:1.

cross-shaped object that varies greatly or, in one case, is entirely omitted. In this design family, crosses are typical additional elements or attributes but, depending on the die, differ in their position and the way they had been copied.

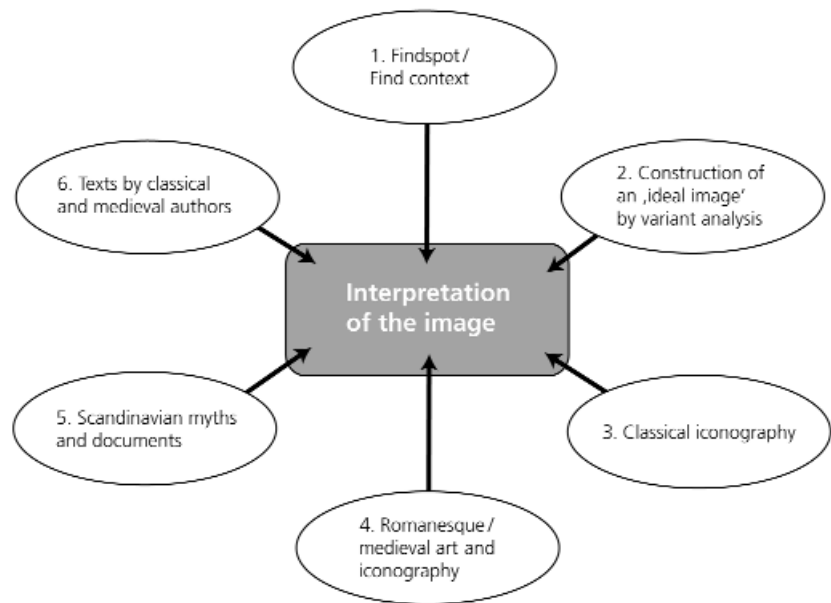
A glance at the areas where the B7 design family is found (**fig. 6**) shows that it must have been a Continental concept. Not only do six of the seven pieces come from there<sup>26</sup>, but so do the most detailed pieces: IK 392 from Gudme is clearly abbreviated and simplified in comparison with IK 350 and IK 389. Consequently, the form must have spread from the South to Gudme in the North and not the other way. This is of interest because it means that the South did not just react to the iconography of the North by copying northern prototypes and merely sought to participate in the northern form exchange – it also actively developed its own, completely new designs and was able to insert them into the distribution network of the copying process.

Also the elites in the South had something to say in this communication by means of images. In the North, their concepts were then used in the production of new bracteates. Here lies perhaps the first evidence for the fact that, not long afterwards, the South contributed an essential innovative impulse to the development of Animal Style II with its interlace ornamentation.

Traditionally, the figure in this design family is interpreted as female<sup>27</sup>, and the attributes in particular are said to indicate that she is a high-status member of society. If this is the case, we have the »female elites« of the period before our very eyes. But how can this be proved conclusively?

Today, generally accepted principles for the interpretation of bracteates exist above all thanks to decades of effort by K. Hauck. His both audacious and well-founded theories have made him the father of and the driving force behind the current interpretation of bracteates. In his opinion, contexts are always of greatest significance: only with the knowledge of the contexts and background history, certain aspects of which are illustrated by the bracteates, it is possible to 'read' and understand the individual images<sup>28</sup>. Unfortunately, these contexts are often unavailable, mainly because the Germanic people themselves wrote no detailed texts. However, context also means all the other available information regarding those who made and wore the bracteates, the prototypes and other comparable images. This information can be obtained in different ways and to various extents (see in more detail below). As a result, contexts for the interpretation of bracteate images can, indeed, be reconstructed.

Hauck thought the figure on the »female-figure« bracteates represented a goddess with magic powers<sup>29</sup>. A number of considerations led to this hypothesis. Already in 1974, Ellmers published a depiction of the Virgin Mary that showed her spinning yarn, a well-known topos (**fig. 7**). Ellmers believed that this could be identified as the prototype for the female bracteates. Also of interest here was the fact that Schmitt had already wondered whether a spindle was depicted on die IK 311 from Oberwerschen (**fig. 5**). In 1990, Enright also thought this might be the case and, in addition, discussed whether certain cross elements on the female bracteates could actually be items related to textile processing; he suggested reels for winding yarn<sup>30</sup>. Further suggestions were soon made for the interpretation of other objects on the B7 bracteates in connection with spinning and weaving, e.g. distaffs (spindles or rods on which the yarn is wound) and looms<sup>31</sup>. The fact that textile processing was of great importance for women of a high-status can be deduced from spindles that are often found in richly appointed female burials<sup>32</sup>. At Oberwerschen and Obermöllern, for example, they were even found in direct association with bracteates. Grave-goods in the form of distaffs made of precious materials, e.g. jet, ivory or amber, bear witness to their importance<sup>33</sup>. The way



**Fig. 8** Principal approaches for an interdisciplinary interpretation of Germanic iconography.

was thus smoothed towards understanding and attempting a preliminary interpretation of the B7 design family. Given that the images on the bracteates are primarily depictions of deities of the Odin religion<sup>34</sup>, the interpretation of the female bracteates as images of a goddess obtained wide acceptance.

Nevertheless, the exact way in which many of the details should be understood, let alone interpreted, is still the subject of discussion. How can one, for example, decide whether the figures are indeed female and not male? Unfortunately, the interpretation of the bracteates is still left to pure fantasy. If it is not possible to establish a systematic method of evaluating these images that also actually throws light on their contexts, i.e. the social, chronological and cultural background of the images, then all our endeavours are, just an amusing guessing game. I will here make an effort to present available possibilities for an attempt at determining a fundamental, well-founded interpretation of the bracteates. The diagram shows six approaches (**fig. 8**); some of the following explanations include concrete references to female bracteates.

1. Findspot, find context and find combinations are all sources of information for the evaluation of a buried artefact. Findspots of Continental female-figure bracteates, if they can still be determined, are richly appointed female burials. The deceased had been high-status members of society of their time. They probably wore the bracteates for two reasons: on the one hand as a status symbol, as already indicated by the choice of material, and on the other hand as an amulet – an interpretation that, incidentally, is supported by many of the runic inscriptions<sup>35</sup>.
2. In order to understand an image as thoroughly as possible, it makes sense to look for other similar images and thus construct an »ideal image«. This is exactly what the design families achieve. The ideal image then becomes the foundation on which the interpretations are based. Individual elements that appear on only one die are problematic because they might be just a coincidental defect in the manufacturing process or in the concept. In certain rare cases, however, such individual elements can also provide an opportunity for a general interpretation of the other dies in the family – if they can be recognised as the most distinct variants among otherwise reduced or abbreviated elements, or if they show deliberately introduced new details.



**Fig. 9** Late antiquity coins as prototypes for the female bracteates: **1-2** Coinage of »Augusta« Licinia Eudoxia, wife of Valentinian III, 5<sup>th</sup> century; both sides showing elements which could have been used as models for the female bracteates (after Kent / Overbeck / Sty-low 1973, no. 762). – **a-d** Four drafts of late antique solidi, showing common patterns (topoi) of coinage as possible archetypes for the female bracteates; 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> century; **a** winged Victoria (with cross-staff and cross-orb); **b-d** the Emperor (with cross-orb or hand-cross and pendilia). – (Drawings P. Haefs). – No scale.

An interpretation of the female bracteates should therefore also start from a reconstructed family image, the »formular«. On the other hand, concentrating on a single appearance of just one element, e.g. on the attribute hanging down from the hand of the central figure on IK 311, constitutes a problem and must be properly explained. Only if it is compatible with the interpretation of all the other elements should the resulting conclusions be included. This is the case for the »spindle« on IK 311 if the interpretation of the cross-shaped attributes as reels or of the rods as distaffs is right<sup>36</sup>.

3. An important source of information for understanding the content of the bracteate images is the iconography of classical antiquity. Ever since research has been undertaken, it was realised that the bracteates were based on Roman prototypes, mainly on coins and medallions – just as the Animal Style, in general, has strong roots in late antique iconography<sup>37</sup>. In the case of the female-figure bracteates, this means that the images' prototypes could perhaps be found on Roman coins. There, too, the rare full-face depictions are mainly used to represent women. The complicated headdress is apparently a high coiffure with a ruler's diadem and *pendilia*, worn by both men and women (fig. 9). Both sexes could also possess orbs with crosses and rods with crosses, but these attributes are especially typical of Victoria, the goddess of victory. The reverse often shows a seated figure, usually also Victoria, but sometimes other female personifications (above all Roma Invicta) that offer many more parallels for the female bracteates. These also have the foreshortened perspective of the lower body as characteristic. Of further significance are the illegible imitations of Roman capital letters that frequently appear in the B7 design family of the female bracteates (e.g. in the simple C form) and that clearly parallel inscriptions on Roman coins with depictions of Victoria.

Examining the possible coin prototypes, it appears that not just one specific coin was used as a model for the female bracteates, but that the various elements were rather assembled from several coin conventions (fig. 9). This phenomenon is typical of the concepts behind the bracteate images and has already been described for other forms. Insignia of power and religion on various imperial coins were used as models; they were placed in new contexts and integrated into Germanic iconography. This demonstrates that Germanic creativity in designing images has been much more inventive and deliberate than one might assume at first sight.

On the whole, most of the coins used as prototypes for the B7 design family are indeed those with female figures. Particularly the Victoria iconography is important here<sup>38</sup>. The belief that the images are female is also supported by designs on later coins that also follow traditions of late antiquity, e.g. Frankish coins and medallions, Merovingian »Pressblech-scheibenfibeln«, i.e. disc brooches made from die-stamped foil (fig. 10)<sup>39</sup>, small ivory plaques depicting a Byzantine empress (fig. 11)<sup>40</sup>, or English coins with portraits of women<sup>41</sup>.

Another object, made around 600 A.D., also contributes to our understanding of the female bracteates: the unique decorative disc from Eschwege-Niederhone in Hessen (fig. 12)<sup>42</sup> that depicts a female figure holding a reflex bow, situated between two cat-like animals. In comparison to the female bracteates, it is striking to note that in addition to the voluminous coiffure with *pendilia* there are epaulettes that resemble the iconography of at least some of the similarly placed elements on the female bracteates. Such epaulettes are otherwise mainly found in the Minerva iconography<sup>43</sup>.

Further interesting parallels are the so-called small bracteates from Hüfingen in Baden- Württemberg (fig. 13)<sup>44</sup>, gold amulet pendants that imitate coins. Four of the small bracteates bear the runic inscrip-



**Fig. 10** Frankish »Pressblechscheibenfibel« of the 7<sup>th</sup> century from Caranda/F displaying a Byzantine empress with a ruler's diadem and *pendilia*. – (After Behrens 1944/45, 19).



**Fig. 11** Ivory plaque depicting a Byzantine empress, around 500, displaying an enthroned empress with diadem and *pendilia*, jewels and cross-rod. – (Drawing P. Haefs, after Volbach 1976, pl. 27). – Original height 26 cm.





**Fig. 12** The central image on the phalera from Eschwege-Niederhone in Hessen, around 600 or early 7<sup>th</sup> century. – (After Hauck 1987, 179). – Scale = 1:1.



**Fig. 13** One of the small »bracteates« from Hüfingen, 6<sup>th</sup> century, with runic *alu*-inscription. – (Drawing P. Haefs, after Fingerlin / Fischer / Düwel 1998). – Original diameter 1,6 cm.

tion *alu* or *ota*, which means that – unlike other barbarian coin imitations – they can be directly related to the gold bracteates. Two of these small bracteates, from the same die and with the inscription *alu*, are thought to be copies of early Byzantine gold coins with a depiction of Victoria. Their motif is closely related to the female bracteates, above all because of the position of the arms of the upright female figure and the long cross held in her right hand. Then again, the characteristic head is missing: this one is small and turned to one side. The comparison with these pieces nevertheless indicates that B7 is an intentional depiction of a woman.

4. Medieval art, too, definitely provides significant parallels, not only because it draws its motifs and portrayal styles from the same roots in late antiquity, but also because it adopted many of the Animal Style elements. As far as the B7 design family is concerned, the iconographic conventions of power are important: epiphanic gestures, crosses as attributes and, above all, a seated position as an element in the motif which (already in antiquity) was exclusively used to portray the person with the highest status, be it a worldly ruler, a saint or the figure of Christ. Given the durability of such traditions, it can be concluded that the iconography of the B7 design family may as well represent a high-status person, perhaps even a deity<sup>45</sup>.

In deciphering the female-figure bracteates, therefore, both their context and iconographic parallels from various periods make it likely that they are intended to be depictions of women of a high standing. Nevertheless, despite the adoption and variation of antique elements, it goes without saying that the Germanic people attached new meanings to their carefully composed new images. Who, therefore, might be depicted here? In order to find ways of reconstructing the context and thus possible interpretations, again several approaches can be followed (fig. 8).

5. The survival of Scandinavian texts from the Middle Ages is a stroke of luck. Especially Iceland retained traditions of Germanic poetry after its conversion to Christianity in AD 1000: they were absorbed by the writings of the new culture, now under the aegis of Christianity. The complex late pagan mythology

became part of the Christian scholarship, and many old traditions thus survived the change of religion. These go back, at least in part, as far as the Migration Period.

In search of a figure that can be linked with the B7 design family, it was repeatedly referred to the goddess Frigg<sup>46</sup>, the wife of Odin, the highest god. The iconography of power would therefore be appropriate for her. Even more important is the fact that one of the B7 images, the Danish IK 391, was used in the Gudme necklace, and its content must therefore be seen as connected with the other bracteates in this composite piece of jewellery<sup>47</sup>. Frigg was also the mother of Baldr, a key mythological figure. Baldr is not only – according to the current interpretation – depicted on an important group of B-bracteates which are also at the centre of the Gudme necklace<sup>48</sup>, but his injured foal is also the motif of the C-bracteates<sup>49</sup>. This finally means that a good portion of the bracteate iconography revolves around the story of Balder. In this lore, Frigg foresees the death of her son and tries to prevent it – in the end in vain. Via the Frigg interpretation, therefore, the content of IK 391 is not only understandable as a part of the Gudme necklace but also the family is coherently integrated in the general interpretation of bracteates as images of northern deities.

Frigg's exceptional importance is also underlined by the fact that a day of the week was dedicated to her: in the translation of the Latin *dies Veneris* (French »vendredi«) we can see that Friday is the day of the goddess Frigg (the Continental goddess Frīja, where »frīatac« comes from)<sup>50</sup>. Moreover, there are also proved connections between Frigg and textile processing: the spindle was one of Frigg's attributes in popular folklore, and the constellation Orion was called »Friggerocken«, »Frigg's distaff«, in Sweden<sup>51</sup>. This opens a path that leads to the inclusion of the Völvas (who are often mentioned in early Icelandic texts) in the interpretation of the B7 form family<sup>52</sup>. Völvas were known as prophetesses and sorceresses. The link between prophecy and spinning exists in many mythologies and popular religions: not only the three norns who wove the threads of fate are worthy of mention here<sup>53</sup>. Consequently, attributes from the field of textile processing can certainly be used to depict prophetic goddesses. Frigg, who can be seen as the prototype of the Völvas, can indeed be taken into consideration as the person depicted on the female-figure bracteates.

6. There is also support for the above-mentioned, without doubt complicated, hypothesis in the texts of classical authors which together with the early Medieval texts provide an important final source. Naturally, these descriptions are not objective reports. It is never absolutely certain that unambiguous facts and historical reality can be distinguished from fiction, propaganda or just phrases. Nevertheless, in classical texts on Germanic people women who exercised great power as a result of their prophetic skills are occasionally mentioned<sup>54</sup>. This shows that the tradition of sorceresses can be traced back to the early days of the Germanic world. The linguistic connection between these prophetesses and the Scandinavian Völvas has already been pointed out several times.

These, shown schematically in **figure 8** and described very briefly above, are the six principal possible approaches to the understanding of Germanic iconography and also to the understanding of female bracteates. However, only by combining the various results from these different auxiliary approaches with the overall interdisciplinary interpretation can the Germanic images be properly understood. It must be stressed, though, that only the first few steps have yet been taken along this difficult path: we are skating somewhat clumsily on the thin ice of iconography.

The fact that one of the female bracteates appears in the cycle of images on the Gudme necklace means that the B7 design family is part of the iconography of bracteates in general, despite it being, without any doubt, a Continental concept. Just one single element, the 'spindle' from Oberwerschen, provided the key to the interpretation suggested here: much more could be achieved by following all the different access

paths towards an interpretation on an interdisciplinary basis. Absolute certainty can probably never be achieved. Whether the present interpretation is acceptable or not: the images on the female bracteates – the diadem of a ruler, complicated coiffure and attributes of power – are typical depictions of a person of a high social distinction, of a member of the ruling class, i.e. of the female elites of that time.

The distribution of the gold bracteates, especially in view of the different clusters of copies, provides proof of a dense interlinking of relationships between the various Germanic tribes. This communication by means of images illuminates a network of central places and their elites. The Continental women who owned the bracteates in the late phase of their production, shortly before the middle of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, were an active part of this cultural network.

## Notes

- 1) Particularly in the case of older finds, the find contexts are often unclear: see the IK volumes for details. For Continental bracteates in general see also Pesch 2004a.
- 2) For dates see Axboe 2004, 260; 2007, 73-76.
- 3) There are exceptions, e.g. the ones from Halle Reideburg that were carried in a bag worn on the hip, but there is no evidence for any other regular practices.
- 4) However, there are also other combinations, e.g. with sword scabbards. In the case of the Scandinavian necklaces, a function as insignia for priests or priestesses has been considered, cf. Hauck (following suggestions by H. Thrane) 1998a, 542; 1998b, 301f. 329. 344ff.; 1998c, 55. – In general see Sundqvist 2002; 2003; 2005.
- 5) Cf. also Andrén 1991, 246. 253f. – Lindeberg 1997. – Arrhenius 1995. – Behr 2001, 95ff. – Pesch 2002. – Behr 2010.
- 6) Axboe 1991, 196-201. – Andrén 1991. – Gaimster 2001. – Hauck 1994; 1987, 166-172. – Müller-Wille 1999, 11f. – Koch 1999, 178f.
- 7) Axboe 1981, 39f. 55f.; 1987, 80f.; 1991, 196f.; 1994, 74; 1999, 66; 2007, 15. 77-91. – Cf. also Salin 1895, 64. – Vierck 1970, 336. – Webster 1978, 340. – Bakka 1981, 14f. – Axboe / Hauck 1985, 101f. – Wicker 1992. – Behr 2010, 69f.
- 8) For definitions of type groups A-D and F see Munksgaard et al. 1978, 336. – Hauck 1978, 364f.; IK 1, Introduction, 12f.
- 9) On terminology in general see Pesch 2007, 13-24; on »Formular« ibidem 15f.
- 10) Pesch 2007.
- 11) In total, the following die images belong to this family: IK 407. 418-419. 433. 454. 475. 477. 481. 487-488. 514. 537. 543-544. 566. – For a detailed description, distribution map and bibliography see Pesch 2007, 268-275.
- 12) On the few known dies and the associated problems Axboe 2004, 3f.; 2007, 14ff.
- 13) Cf. Pesch 2004a, 160f.; 2007, 330-333. – See also von Carnap-Bornheim 1998; 2001.
- 14) Pesch 2007.
- 15) Cf. Pesch 2004b; 2007.
- 16) On the subject in general Steuer 2003. – Cf. also Lund Hansen 1988; 2001. – Brink 1996, esp. 236ff. – Hårdh / Larsson 1998; 2002. – Fabech 1999a, 42ff.; 1999b, 455-460. 469ff. – Steuer 1999b; 2006. – Müller-Wille 2004. – Andersson 2007.
- 17) Pesch in print.
- 18) On Kent see in particular Behr 1994; 2000; 2006.
- 19) On this subject in general see Roth 1979; 1986, 33-39; 1998, 356. – Steuer 1999a, 243. – Pesch 2007, 360-373.
- 20) The group also used to be called the »Fürstenberg type« or »Oberwerschen type«. On the subject in general see Werner 1935, 189-195 (here still interpreted as male figures). – Åberg 1940, 110f. – Mackeprang 1952, 103f. – Sommer 1968. – Ellmers 1971. – Hauck 1985, 181-185. – Enright 1990. – Klein-Pfeuffer 1993, 196-199. – Axboe 1994, 74. – Häbller et al. 1997, 126f. (Axboe). – Motz 1998, 51f. – Pesch 2002; 2007, 125-128. – Simek 2004.
- 21) IK numbers are the die numbers in the iconographic catalogue (IK). They should always be quoted whenever a bracteate is mentioned to ensure that the identification is unambiguous: mere mention of the findspot often leads to confusion.
- 22) See Hauck 1994; 1998a; 1998c.
- 23) See Häbller et al. 1997. There is only one other similar face, IK 574 from Issendorf. This is a bastard form of design family B7 (see Pesch 2007, 126ff.) which should perhaps be seen as the result of an imperfect copying process. Another figure with a frontal face is IK 266 Hamfelde, an A bracteate that is difficult to interpret, which also has a spread hand and other details that are similar to the female bracteates.
- 24) The quotes from Pesch 2002 referring to »breasts« and »female bracteates« by Simek 2004, esp. 201. 204, contain errors, or are taken out of context and thus not correct.
- 25) Only one other bracteate depicts a figure sitting on a chair or throne: IK 206 Várpalota-B from Hungary, but this is a side view.
- 26) It is therefore incorrect when Simek speaks of 80% Continental and 20% Danish finds (Simek 2004, 201. 210).
- 27) Åberg 1940, 110f. – Mackeprang 1952, 103ff. – Sommer 1968. – Ellmers 1971. – Hauck 1985, 181-185. – Enright 1990, 54-70. – Klein-Pfeuffer 1993, 196-199. – Axboe 1994, 74. – Häbller et al. 1997, 126 (Axboe). – Werner 1935. – Simek 2004.
- 28) Hauck 1975; 1976a; 1976b, 162f.; 1978, 363. – Cf. Pesch 2007, 40. 367-370.
- 29) Hauck 1985, 150-157. 181-185. – Cf. also Beck / Hauck 2002, 85ff. (Hauck).
- 30) Enright 1990, 61ff.

- 31) Cf. Enright 1990, 64 (weaving beam). 113 (weaving sword).
- 32) Koch 1997, 36. 41. 46f. – Gräslund 1999, 97. – For the four looms in the Oseberg grave see Hoffmann 1964, 330.
- 33) Pirling 1994. – For Oberwerschen see Schmidt 1966.
- 34) Hauck 1978 and *passim*.
- 35) On this subject see Düwel 2008, 44-55. – Düwel / Heizmann 2006. – Heizmann 2001a; 2011.
- 36) Tentative Sommer 1968, 53 and Enright 1996, 113 (weaving sword?).
- 37) Vierck 1981.
- 38) See in general RIC. – Morrisson 1970. – Kent / Overbeck / Sty-low 1973. – Depeyrot 1987. – Radnoti-Alföldi 1999. – Axboe / Kromann 1992. – Cf. Pesch 2002, 44-50 esp. 47 pl. 2.
- 39) Moreau 1877, pl. 31, 2. – Behrens 1944/45, 19ff. no. 6 (four examples). – Schulze-Dörrlamm 1986, 920f. with the stylised image of a standing Byzantine empress with a two-tiered crown headdress and pendilia.
- 40) Volbach 1976, 49f. pl. 27, 51.
- 41) Zipperer 1999.
- 42) Böhner 1991. – Cf. Hauck 1987, 179ff.
- 43) LIMC »Minerva« (II, 802 no. 204; 806, no. 277); cf. also the entry under »Artemis«.
- 44) Fingerlin / Fischer / Düwel 1998. – Heizmann 2004.
- 45) In principle, during the Migration Period, nothing less would be considered worthy of depiction.
- 46) This can be presented only briefly here; for more detail see Enright 1990. – Pesch 2002.
- 47) Hauck 1998a; 1998b, 327-346. – Beck / Hauck 2002, 85ff.
- 48) On the so-called three gold bracteates see Hauck 1987, 18f. 28; 1998b, 333-344; 1998c, 49-56. – Beck / Hauck 2002, 72-94.
- 49) Hauck 1970, 160-203; 1978, 383-389; 1980. – Heizmann 2001a, 336ff.
- 50) de Vries 1970, II, 302-307. – Cf. Heizmann 2001b, 291.
- 51) de Vries 1970, II, 304. – Enright 1990, 59.
- 52) On the Völva in general see de Vries 1970, I, 275f. 319-327. – Biezais / Ström 1975, 259f. (Ström). – Birkhan 1970, 553-557. – Enright 1990, 67ff.; 1996, 170ff. 186f. – Hauck 1985, 153; 1998c, 33-37. – Sundqvist 2005, 19-23. – Cf. also on the subject of Celtic prophetesses with weaving beams West 2001, 470-473. – Further evidence in Pesch 2002, 53f. – See also on Frigg and Freya Heizmann 2001b. – De Vries 1970, II, 305f. – Enright 1990, 49. 51f.; 1996, 170-195.
- 53) Heide 2006. – Motz 1998, 49 with further bibliography. – Pirling 1994, 88.
- 54) Much 1937, 118f. – Volkmann 1964. – De Vries 1970, I, 320f. – Enright 1988, 68. – Enright in this volume.

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## Zusammenfassung / Abstract / Résumé

### Goldbrakteaten und Frauengräber. Die materielle Kultur als Mittel der Elitenkommunikation in der Völkerwanderungszeit

Die völkerwanderungszeitlichen Goldbrakteaten gehören als goldener Anhängeschmuck, der außerhalb von Skandinavien hauptsächlich in Frauengräbern gefunden wird, in die weibliche Sphäre der gehobenen Sachkultur. Einige ihrer bildlichen Darstellungen lassen genauso wie die Fundumstände Rückschlüsse auf die Lebenswirklichkeit ihrer Besitzerinnen zu. Gleichzeitig sind die goldenen Bildträger dafür geeignet, Verbindungen der Menschen und Elitenkommunikation über weite Regionen Nordeuropas hinaus zu rekonstruieren. Von besonderem Interesse ist eine kleine Gruppe motivisch verwandter Stücke, die als Darstellungen von Frauen interpretiert wird. Diese sog. Frauenbrakteaten sind mit Bildchiffren hohen sozialen Status ausgestattet. Somit visualisiert das Motiv weibliche Eliten der Völkerwanderungszeit.

### Gold Bracteates and Female Burials. Material Culture as a Medium of Elite Communication in the Migration Period

The bracteates of the Migration Period are golden pendants that belong in the female sphere of high-status material culture. Outside Scandinavia, they were mainly found in female burials. The complicated images on these bracteates are an authentic expression of Germanic ideology at a time when writing was almost unknown. Clusters of motif-related bracteates, produced by a copying process, allow us to reconstruct regions of dynamic exchange that make up

a common area of culture, religious beliefs and communication. Regardless of how their regulated iconography may be interpreted today, the bracteates are perhaps the most important evidence of membership in and communication between the elites of the Migration Period in northern Europe. One series of bracteates with closely related images is known today as „female bracteates«. Their motif can be interpreted as a woman with objects of high social status, thus visualising female elites of the migration period.

#### **Bractéates en or et tombes de femmes. La culture matérielle en tant que moyen de communication des élites à l'époque des Grandes Migrations**

Les bractéates de l'époque des Grandes Migrations sont des pendentifs en or qui appartiennent à la sphère féminine de la culture matérielle de haut statut. Hors de la Scandinavie, elles ont principalement été mis au jour dans des tombes de femmes. L'iconographie complexe de ces bractéates est une expression authentique de l'idéologie germanique, à une période où l'écriture était presque inconnue. Des groupes de bractéates liés par le motif, produits par copie, nous permettent de restituer les régions caractérisées par des échanges dynamiques, qui ont permis d'établir une aire commune de culture, de croyances religieuses et de communication. Quelle que soit la manière dont on peut aujourd'hui interpréter leur iconographie récurrente, les bractéates sont certainement la preuve la plus importante de l'appartenance à l'élite et de la communication entre ses membres à l'époque des Grandes Migrations dans le nord de l'Europe. Une série de bractéates iconographiquement proches est aujourd'hui connue sous le terme de »bractéates féminines«, qu'on peut interpréter comme étant la représentation de femmes avec des objets de haut rang social, illustrant de la sorte les élites féminines de la période des Grandes Migrations.

Traduction: G. Pierrelvein