

Guldgubber – an overview

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Throughout Scandinavia gold-foil-figures – the so-called *guldgubber* – have been found at several places from Bornholm to Uppåkra up to Borg. These *guldgubber* are made of a gold alloy mixed with copper or silver for hardness; therefore the *guldgubber* tend to have either a slight redish or whitish colour. Up to now (2005) 3000-3500 *guldgubber* (including fragments) have been found in the whole of Scandinavia. The greatest hoard of *guldgubber* was found in Sorte Muld on Bornholm (Denmark) with over 2300 pieces.

The find circumstances are unfortunately very diverse. They were found under churches, in dunes by the sea, in settlement contexts, in buildings and in a prehistoric rubbish pile. Due to these circumstances the dating of the *guldgubber* is difficult and one has to settle for 400-800 a. D. – the Migration Age.

There are two different ways of classifying *guldgubber*. Either they are distinguished by their way of crafting (either stamped or cut out) or by their iconography. Here the later one is chosen.

There are five main categories: male figures, female figures, figures with two persons, wraiths and animals.

Male figures are predominant on Bornholm and lack of spread outside Bornholm. They are normally depicted in profile with, of course, exceptions. They may bear a staff, which may be long and sometimes taller than the bearer or may be rather short as well. They do hold as well in some cases a Franconian *Sturzbecher* (tumbling beaker) in one hand and a long, unidentified object in the other hand. Their dress ranges from a very rich kaftan with a broad trim – probably tablet woven – to only a short loincloth. Other accompanying objects are: a ring, a diadem and a short sword or a sax.

The female figures are mostly depicted in profile as well with rare exceptions. They all wear a long dress, sometimes with a train, and they all have a so-called Irish-ribbon-knot. This dress and the hairstyle are consistent from the Migration Age up to the Viking Age. The women's dress may be richly decorated, but there are depictions of a very simple variant. The only accompanying attributes are: a horn or horn like shaped object and an unidentified object. They sometimes wear a big fibula (so-called *rygnap fibula* (button-bow-fibula)) and sometimes a rich necklace.

The double figures normally consist of a man and a woman, but up to now there are 3-5 exceptions known, where both of them have the same sex. The people are depicted, as the ones described above, are always facing each other and touching each other in different gestures, sometimes he is touching her, sometimes she is holding him or they both embrace each other.

A new category is the one of the wraiths. It sums up all the depictions of neutral anthropomorphic figures. The majority of them is shown in the same gesture of probably a dead person, therefore - and for their depiction itself - they were given the name wraith, meaning ghost and apparition. They are normally depicted en face with exaggerated round eyes, big hands and on tiptoe. They normally do not wear any clothes and if only a piece of cloth not worth being called clothes. They normally do not wear any attributes, except for a staff in one case.

The last category, the animals, is the easiest group of *guldgubber* with no problems of classifying. Every non-human *guldgubber* is an animal. Up to now 12 whole *guldgubber* depicting animals have been found, but only on Bornholm. Identifying them is a lot more difficult and their identifications range from bear to pig and deer.

There has been a vast discussion of the iconographic meanings and the usage of the gold-foil-figures up to today. Interpretations range from dancing gods to worldly justice utilities.

W. Holmqvist proposed 1961 the idea of a dancing couple on the *double gubber*, due to the idea of bent knees of the male figure. This interpretation has been discarded for several years now.

K. Hauck had in the beginning of the 80's the idea of gods as well and tried to identify gods on the *guldgubber* by comparing the depictions to the brakteates and to the Snorra Edda and the descriptions of the gods there. Taking it for granted that the depictions must indeed show gods, he could easily identify with Christian sources pagan gods on them. He identified the *double gubber* as the marriage of Freyr and Gerdr due to the Skírnismál. The man with the Sturzbecher was obviously Freyr with his folded ship Skidbladnir and the five known versions of the shouting man was indeed Odin, like on the brakteates as well. He identified the woman on all *guldgubber*, when standing alone, as Freyra because of her necklace Brisngamen, even the depictions, where she is shown with a fibula. This interpretation is not yet discarded though.

M. Watt excavated in the early 80's the *guldgubber* from Bornholm and proposed the idea of temple money. She too thought that only gods were worthy enough to be depicted on gold and depicted at all. As the people on the *guldgubber* are gods, the figures, tiny and not very useful on the first glance, must be temple money to be allowed to go into a temple and as probably used to pay for the sacrifices for instance. Thinking of the Germanic religion one comes fast to the conclusion that there are no temples like the roman temples (from which we have the knowledge of special temple money) known from that age and none has survived. It may be said then, that there were no Germanic temples, which makes temple money useless. So this interpretation may be discarded, though this has not happened so far.

R. Simek was the first to propose the idea of a not all-religious usage. He proposed not to name the gods but to think of entities or leaders, like kings. He compared the gesture on the *double gubber* with the German *Sachsenspiegel* and came to prove the idea of a depiction of a wedding, but discarded the idea of a wedding between Freyr and Gerdr, as this is not a loving couple.

The latest interpretation of the *guldgubber* was proposed by S. Ratke and R. Simek in 2004. This interpretation proposes a whole new view on the *guldgubber*. In their interpretation they compared *guldgubber* to medieval law texts, as the *Sachsenspiegel*. The *Sachsenspiegel* is very useful indeed, as it has explaining pictures of the law text and therefore shows the gestures used in law contexts. By comparing the gestures to one another it was possible to identify gestures on the *guldgubber*. As law and law gestures are very static a parallel may be drawn. It was, for instance, possible to identify three different marriage types on the *double gubber*: the *munt*-marriage, the Friedel-marriage and the widow marriage. The *munt*-marriage may be shown on the *Guldgubber* where he is holding his hand over her, as in ON the word *munt* still means *hand* and *tutelage*. The Friedel-marriage may be depicted on the *guldgubber* where both are holding each other, as in a roman law text this is an illegal marriage, which the Friedel marriage in christian law was. The widow marriage is very likely shown on the *guldgubber*, where she is grasping him, a gesture of power over someone. As it is allowed in Norwegian law, that a woman or widow, being able to feed herself, is allowed to choose her husband. The wraiths could be classified and described as dead people because of the arm and hand gesture. In the *Sachsenspiegel* dead people are always pointed lying and with their hand and arms parallel to the body, just as the wraiths. And if the wraiths are turned around 90° one can easily see the parallels to dead people. This might be interesting in the process of heritage. Other pictures, like the man with the *Sturzbecher*, could be set into the context of signing a contract, when it was usual to drink to that. This interpretation does not

want to see the *guldgubber* in a religious context, but wants to set them into a law and worldly context. The possibility of a double depiction of law gestures and normal people and gods at the same time should not be ruled out, but it should be considered that not every depiction in former times must have shown a god.

Still the mystery of the *guldgubber* is not solved, but we are looking forward to new, interesting finds and interpretations, which hopefully bring a bit more light into the darkness of the Migration Age.