

*Guldgubber*: Relics of Pre-Christian Law Rituals?  
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The past years have yielded an ever increasing number of so-called *guldgubber*, little gold foil figures found in many places of Scandinavia, but predominantly on Bornholm. The finds on Bornholm alone amount to about 1350 of such complete items, and if including fragments, 2500 (out of the total number of approximately 2800 *guldgubber* found in all of Scandinavia) have been found to date on Bornholm, representing over 425 out of the 600 known dies.

The *guldgubber*, “which range in size from 4 cm down to 5-6 mm, are made of thin gold foil of varying purity (some mixed with copper and even a few of almost pure silver)” (Watt 2002: 83). While most of them have been stamped into goldfoil, ca. 100 of the figures have been cut out of gold foil. “Six bronze stamps for *guldgubber* have been found at two localities on Bornholm (one of them close to Sorte Muld), two at Uppåkra in Skåne and two on Sjælland.” (Watt 2002: 84; Watt 1999a: 180; 183)

Of those items complete enough to be identifiable, the vast majority on Bornholm are male *gubber* (ca. 200 imprints), while female *gubber* (ca. 30 imprints) and *doublegubber* (15) play only a minor role as far as quantity is concerned. The statistics make clear that Bornholm must have had an exceptional role in the dissemination and use of the *guldgubber*. The domination of male *gubber* here is exceptional in itself, and, among these, the staff-bearing type amounts to considerably more than half of all male *gubber*, and they are not found outside Bornholm. On the other hand, cup-bearing male figures, which are found in the rest of Scandinavia as well only amount to ca. 10 % of male *gubber* in Bornholm. Other males, with less obvious and consistent attributes, amount to the remaining 40 %. Only a very small number show zoomorphic images, apparently of pigs and possibly bears and horses.

Outside Bornholm, the picture is quite different: most of the *gubber* elsewhere belong to the *doublegubber* (ca. 105 as opposed to only 15 on Bornholm), with also a minority of female *gubber* (in Denmark and Sweden only) of only 20 imprints (with 30 items on Bornholm).

Bornholm is also atypical as to the find circumstances in which *gubber* were found. In more or less all other places from Northern Norway to Sweden and Fyn, *gubber* were predominantly found in great halls of central places in the Scandinavian Migration Age, or else in places which might once have contained such halls (like under the church in Mære in Western Norway or Uppåkra in Sweden). On Bornholm, on the other hand, all the items were found in the top soil of ploughed fields, and archaeological investigation has shown that the soil there consisted to a large part of deposits removed from settlement sites in Sorte Muld.

Therefore it is impossible to say if the original deposition of *guldgubber* functioned the same way on Bornholm as outside where the *gubber* were laid down along or in the central post holes of the afore-mentioned great halls or other cult buildings (as in Uppåkra). On Bornholm, we have absolutely no means of knowing about the original places of deposition and therefore all interpretations must rest on the *gubber* themselves.

There are four major categories of anthropomorphic images on *guldgubber*: male, female, *doublegubber* and *wraiths*. The male figures fall into two main categories: on the one hand the staff bearers, who are normally dressed in a richly decorated kaftan, but are depicted like a *wraith* on a few items; on the other hand the „drinkers“ holding a (glass)vessel of the

*Sturzbecher* type and dressed in a richly decorated kaftan as well. The third group shows men without any attributes or gestures dressed in varying styles.

There are no major categories for the distinction of women on the *guldgubber*. There are women who bear a kind of drinking vessel, which might be a horn, but there are also women who do not have any attributes whatsoever. They are dressed in a wide variety of styles from very rich to very simple. The only common item is the irish-ribbon-knot hairstyle which all of them seem to have. It consists of a simple half hitch at the back of the head and shows the hair to be very long, from (rarer) shoulder-length to floor-length.

The so-called *doublegubber* denote *guldgubber* with two persons on one image. They are very diverse and differ in gesture and clothing. The different gestures will be analysed later on. The one common feature is that they are always facing each other and are shown as having some sort of physical contact, either in an embrace or by holding on to each other.

A category of the *guldgubber* not previously identified as a separate group are the *wraiths*. The dominant feature of all *guldgubber* belonging to this category is that they apparently do not wear clothing, or if, only extremely schematically. The eyes are mostly stressed in an otherwise simple iconographic representation. Some of these *gubber*, which were not stamped but rather cut out individually have no distinguishable faces. There are also several *wraiths* which only have eyes, but no mouth or nose. The most striking detail is that they have no indication as to their gender, as they are marked as neither obviously male nor female. The hands are always shown very clearly and sometimes are drawn much bigger than natural. In almost half the cases the arms are shown parallel to the body, the hands are unnaturally large and are held with the palm to the viewer, the thumb thus stretched outward. Their feet are normally pointing to one side with their tips stretched out, as if on tiptoe or lying down (see fig.1). The only attribute that occurs on this type of *wraith* is a collar (*torques*) made from a tiny separate strip of gold material or imprinted; a single die seems to show a mixture of *wraith* and staff-bearer.

Earlier interpretations have seen the *guldgubber* mainly as an expression of Migration Age religious practices in Scandinavia. In keeping with the finds that come only from a few major religio-political centres in Scandinavia marked by large halls, finds of *gubber* and other gold items, coloured bead and imported glass ware, one tended to interpret the figures on the foil pictures mainly as depiction of gods. Several ingenious theories connected the figures and their attributes with mythological beings known from Viking Age and later sources of Germanic mythology, thereby trying to bridge a gap of 300 to 500 years between the Migration Age iconographical sources of the *gubber* and the learned literary sources of the Middle Ages.

Hauck, in particular, found ways of associating the staff-bearing male with the god Thor, because Adam of Bremen (in the 1070s) described a supposed idol of Thor in the assumed temple in Uppsala as holding a sceptre, equating Thor with Jupiter (*Gesta Hammurgensis*: IV, 26). He also identified one of the males, bearing an outsize cup-like container, as Freyr, who would be carrying the folded-up ship *Skíðblaðnir* in a type of quiver with the bows sticking out at the top (Hauck 1993: 436). The couple, shown on the *doublegubber*, was interpreted by Hauck as the mythological couple of Freyr and Gerðr. This rather far-fetched theory is, however, very unlikely as this story is only preserved in a High Medieval Eddic poem, *Skírnismál*, and even there is no talk of an actual marriage between the lusty god and his reluctant young giantess. Those *gubber* we categorise as *wraiths*, especially those with a gold ring round the neck, he identified as the god Freyr. Such a neck-ring can also be found on bracteates and on small gold figurines (Hauck 1992: 540), which according

to Hauck are probably also images of Freyr, who is admittedly described as rich and powerful in medieval sources. (Motz 1996: 11-32) From parallels with the near-contemporary gold bracteates he thinks to be able to identify other gods as well, like Odin. Because he identifies the male person with visible breath on the bracteates as Odin, he identifies the „shouting“ male figures on the *guldgubber* as Odin, too (Hauck 1992: 542f) The female figures, apart from those on the *doublegubber* are supposed to be the goddess Freya, mainly because of a rather splendid necklace depicted on some of the *gubber*; which he identifies with Freya's necklace Brisingamen of the Eddas (Hauck 1992: 539f).

If we were to believe Hauck, we could thus find the major gods of the pagan Viking Age pantheon reflected on the little Migration Age pictures. But apart from the large time-gap between the *gubber* and the medieval literary sources he uses, his argumentation is flawed in several ways. Our major point of criticism is that he tacitly starts from the assumption that all the figures shown must indeed be gods. His main reason is that in the early Middle Ages only gods would be considered to be important enough to be shown on any type of picture. However, the depiction of other mythological and heroic figures (even of animals) on *guldgubber* and bracteates, on early picture stones (heroes), and even grave stones (humans) speaks another language.

Neither do we know who is depicted on the *guldgubber* nor what their use was in religious or secular practice. Speculations as to their use as „temple money“ (Watt 1999: 174) have no foundation in the actual finds of the *guldgubber*, quite apart from the fact that the Germanic religion seems rarely to have had any temples in the narrow sense of the word (Simek 2003: 96). Any attempt of interpreting the *guldgubber* must therefore start with a close analysis not only of the circumstances of the archaeological finds, wherever possible, but also of the complete iconographical arrangement, including attributes and gestures of the human and other beings depicted. Only a systematic comparison of the various single elements with contemporary iconographical and literary sources and, failing this, later parallels can lead to more reliable results.

As hairstyle and clothing, especially of the female figures, have already been investigated in some detail (Simek 2000: 468-479; Simek 2002: 93-124; Munksgaard 1990: 97-100), the aim of the present paper is to investigate the meaning of the often striking brachial gestures of the figures on the *guldgubber*. A preliminary listing of gestures of the couple depicted on the *doublegubber* has been attempted by M. Watt, but she refrained from drawing any conclusions as to the identity or function of the *guldgubber* from her table of brachial positions (Watt 1999: 181f).

These brachial positions have been preliminarily noted on the *doublegubber*, where the couple, usually of mixed sexes, seems to embrace, even hug, or at least hold each other by the wrists or lapels of the rich coats these figures usually seem to wear. Thus it is hardly surprising that M. Watt has concentrated on these striking positions, and they have subsequently been the focus of further speculations as to the role and depictions of the *doublegubber* (Simek 2000: 468-479; Simek 2002: 93-124).

Of the single male and female persons depicted on the other *gubber*, however, only the attributes have received some attention. These include, for the male figures, in particular the glass beaker of the *Sturzbecher*-type, the staff (or lance/scepter?), the ring, the strange paddle-shaped object, in rare cases swords and in only one known instance a type of crown or rather diadem. In depictions of the female figures, it is particularly the drinking-horn carried or held by the women that has attracted attention, otherwise only the iconographically exaggerated and thus stressed fibulae and necklaces. On the *doublegubber*, attributes play only a minor

role and only a few items include a beaker held between the couple or a plant (leek?) held similarly between them.

As there is no indication that any of the typical attributes of the male single *gubber* of the „princely“ or „parading“ figures or of the women’s attributes – as mentioned above, we have to rely on the brachial gestures.

There are three different types of *doublegubber*:

1. The male is grasping the female by her hip or at least puts his hand on her hip; in a few cases he puts his hand against her cheek or chin.
2. The woman grasps the man by his wrist
3. The man and the woman are holding or hugging each other.

The position of the couple reminds one of a marriage or love scene. If we have a look at the Germanic marriages, we see, that there are three different types we know of: The first is the common *munt* marriage, where the woman is handed over in the *munt* of her husband. The second one is the so called Friedel-marriage, where man and woman are allowed to live together without a formal contract – it is more or less a love marriage. The third type is a sub-form of the so-called *friedel*-marriage, in which women are allowed to choose their husbands without the consent of a man wielding the *munt* over her, and at the same can keep their property without losing her legal status even if she marries below her rank. However, in this type of marriage she seems to have forfeited some of her inheritance rights, unless she was a widow (Meissner 1939: 11, §17: p. 209).

The first category, that it is to say where the man obviously holds the woman in some way or touches her with his hand, while she remains static and does not show any gesture whatsoever, might be identified with the classical *munt* marriage. Our reason for this interpretation is that the meaning of OHG *munt* was „hand, protection“, ON *mund* „hand, guardian“, ON *mundr* „bridal gift; dowry“, OE *mund* „hand, tutelage, bridal gift“ and that the protection and tutelage provided by formal marriage may have been depicted on the *gubber* by the somewhat exaggerated hand being protectively extended towards the female.

The one special case where the male touches the female’s chin shows otherwise the same formal position of the two partners, but this particular gesture in medieval iconography normally signifies love or affection (cf. the iconography of Hosea and Gomer in medieval art) (Garnier 1982: 160-161), but normally connected with marital love (see fig. 2).

The second category, where the woman in some way grasps the man’s wrist nearest to the viewer, may be connected with the particular type of the medieval sub-form of Friedel-marriage, namely the “widow” marriage. We come to this conclusion as she is taking him, and therefore obviously being the active part and chooses him.

The third category, however, seems to us to show the marriage between to equal, consenting partners but without the formal ritual of conferring the *munt* from the bride’s father (or guardian) to the husband, as would have been the case in arranged marriages. This type of marriage would be typical for love matches and was perfectly legal, but the woman did not enter the *munt* (tutelage) of her husband, but rather had equal rights. Later, after Christianisation, this type of marriage was not considered fully legal by the church or at least of equal legal standing, but was nevertheless quite common. Medieval manuscripts show the distinction between this *friedel*-marriage and the formal arranged marriage iconographically by hugging and embracing in the first case and the formal way of joining the partners’ hands by a priest in the second case (Ebel 1988: 171). So we consider this to be a normal Friedel-marriage.

The second major group of *guldgubber* that offers itself for a non-mythological interpretation is the group of *gubbers* with depictions of men bearing the *Sturzbecher* type glass vessels mentioned above. These often coloured glass vessels (mainly green and yellow) were produced in the Franconian empire during the Merovingian Age (5<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> centuries), especially along the Rhine and in the Black Forest. The name refers to the fact that the bottom of these vessels is round, so that they cannot be put down without being emptied beforehand. There are several different types of *Sturzbecher*, with cone-shaped ones varying with bell-shaped ones and very long tall glass beakers. The main types of these can all be found on the *guldgubber*. Archaeological finds in Scandinavia both from graves and great halls testify to the actual usage of these beakers in Scandinavia, although they all seem to have been imported from the continent.

The other attributes of the males with *Sturzbecher* type vessels vary: unidentified longitudinal objects and rings are the most common, but there usually is at least one other attribute to be found in connection with the beakers. As the drinking from the raised beaker is the only obvious common gesture to these depictions of males on *guldgubber*, we shall concentrate on them even though the identification of the other objects is far from certain.

Unfortunately, there are no comparable pictures of people drinking from any type of vessel in medieval legal illustrated manuscripts, and thus a simple comparison seems impossible at this stage. Despite this lack of illustrations, there is actually a medieval legal custom connected with formal drinking outside religious practice, namely the drinking to *arrha*.

The *arrha* was originally a sum of money paid out to the seller of an object, especially those of substantial value (land, houses, cattle, women), as a deposit in confirmation of the contract during or after the signing of the contract. It thus had a symbolical function in finalising the arrangement. It was increasingly converted into its value in form of a drink taken together by the seller and the buyer and thus took on the meaning of “formal drink to confirm a sale”. The custom is preserved right up to the present in the shape of the custom of “we shall drink to that” at a contract.

The fact that the depiction of a formal drink on the *guldgubber* – and the fact that an expensive imported glassbeaker is used throughout, points to a formal drink. Being connected at least one case with a ring shown on a free area of the picture may also point to a formal promise or oath.

We should therefore consider the raised cup as some sort of confirmation of a contract, just like the *arrha*. But whether it referred to an actual sales contract between two humans, or to formal and symbolic transference of allegiance to a lord or even a deity, or whether it could simply confirm a votive oath is very hard to establish without further archaeological evidence or iconographical parallels.

There are two kinds of gestures mainly found on the pictures of *wraiths* that have not been discussed in previous publications to any extent but have one thing in common, namely that their medieval iconographic counterparts are both identified as gestures of refusal and incapability.

One of them is by far more common on the *guldgubber*, namely the outstretched arms parallel to the body with palms forward and with a greatly exaggerated size of hands. The other, more common in medieval usage, is a person clutching his right wrist with his left hand; for this gesture we have only three examples on *gubber*. For a further related gesture of refusal, namely the arms crossed on the chest, the *gubber* provide only a single imprint from Bornholm.

The wide spread group of *wraiths* on *guldgubber* shown with large hands and palm forward are typical for Bornholm. They have so far escaped scholarly notice as a separate group and have partly been identified as *dancers*; the few examples published (Watt 1999: 180) have been explained as dancers mainly on the grounds of the position of the feet, which seems as if they are standing on tiptoe. There is however no indication of movement in these depictions and the stiffness of the posture speaks another language altogether (see fig. 3). These pictures are difficult to explain mainly because of their lack of clothing and other attributes, except a golden collar as explained above.

This type of posture is unknown from bracteates and contemporary material and can be only explained by medieval parallels. In medieval iconography, parallel arms and flat palms are found in two different contexts, namely as a sign of incapacity due to death on the one hand and as a gesture of refusal on the other hand. Both types of gestures are found in legal texts and should therefore be seen to have predominantly legal relevance, although their use is not limited to legal texts alone.

The most striking parallel to the *wraiths* on the *guldgubber* can be found in the illustrations of the Heidelberg manuscript of the *Sachsenspiegel*, where dead persons are presented in that posture throughout (see fig. 4). The first consequence to be drawn from this medieval iconography is that we should view the *wraiths* in a horizontal position rather than upright. In this way, the strange position of their feet is logically explained as the natural position of a lying person. This explanation is far more in keeping with the stiff posture of the figure as a *wohle* and renders the interpretation of the *wraiths* as dancers totally obsolete. The fact that these *wraiths* are not only depicted as reclining, but also with their palms upward, naked and without detailed facial features makes an interpretation as dead persons by far the most likely. It is a natural consequence that dead persons are shown with a gesture of refusal or incapability. It is not possible from this state of investigation to say why some of the *wraiths* are shown with their eyes iconographically stressed and why some of them have no facial features at all, unless these are iconographical variants to the depiction of the dead. However, in medieval iconography (Garnier 1982: 178f) the gesture of incapacity symbolised by parallel arms and outstretched palms is not only limited to dead persons or in one case applied to a shadow in the Heidelberg *Sachsenspiegel*, and therefore we might assume that those *wraiths* are dead or probably even shadows like a soul. It may be that the iconographical differences mark different states of a human being.

The other, less common, gesture of incapacity found on the *guldgubber*, namely the clutching of one wrist with the other hand, has nothing to do with dead people at all in medieval iconography, but severely injured ones, as shown in the *Sachsenspiegel*. In the manuscript illustrations of the *Sachsenspiegel* it signifies refusal of all kinds and all classes including women and children, simply shown to be unwilling or incapable of fulfilling a task (see fig. 5). In general iconography, especial religious contexts, the meaning of the refusal can be extended from simple inability to the stressing of a dramatic situation or the expression of intense pain (Garnier 1982: 198-201). As can be seen from the obvious exaggeration of iconographical elements as hands, eyes and foot position on the *gubber* of the *wraith* type, it must have been their intention to stress the message conveyed by the picture. As in medieval iconography the two afore mentioned types of gesture of incapacity are very common and absolutely clear in their meaning, it seems likely that such an emphasis on the relevant iconographic details must point to a similar meaning in the Merovingian Age gold foil pictures.

However, it is not at this stage possible to tell if all these pictures actually show dead people or whether it is possible that we are confronted with other types of refusal or incapacity as in the medieval manuscripts.

These three examples given may serve as a preliminary indication that *guldgubber* cannot (only?) be seen as mythological pictures. It can hardly be disputed that at least some iconographical details strongly resemble medieval legal gestures and may thus have to be seen at least partly in a legal, or possibly legal-ritualistic, context. Though the time gap is quite distinctive from the Merovingian-Age to the *Sachsenspiegel*, we still may draw conclusions from the comparisons, as law gestures tend to be very conservative and stay that way for a long time.

At this stage we are not able to prove whether this legal context has to be seen in a purely secular setting or whether it is possible to combine the older mythological interpretations in the wider sense of the words (i.e. seeing the anthropomorphic beings on the *guldgubber* as mythological persons, if not necessarily particular named gods) with our new findings on the legal background of the iconography. The fact, however, that outside Bornholm the *guldgubber* were deposited in an either aristocratic and/or religious setting of the great halls, together with the precious material of *guldgubber* alone points towards an exclusive or élitiste usage of the little pictures, seems to assign to them a role in important legal transactions, whether these were mainly religious or secular, even dynastic in nature.

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