

DISCUSSION ARTICLE

Comments on Maria Panum Baastrup's Invitation systems and identification in Late Iron Age southern Scandinavia

Margrethe Watt

Bornholms Museum, Rønne, Denmark

ABSTRACT

The article provides some basic facts and updates on the gold foil figures and also questions certain aspects of Baastrup's interpretation. Attention is drawn to the importance of the complex iconographic content of the gold foils.

KEYWORDS

Gold foil figures; amulets; die (patrix); central place; iconography

As a so-called 'expert' on the narrow topic of gold foil figures (*guldgubber*), it is always stimulating to come across novel interpretations – in this case the possible use of these small and fragile objects as tokens of invitation and/or identification. Baastrup's article reminds us how difficult it can be to imagine a time when a relatively small number of people would recognise the 'chieftain' or the 'king', if they saw him, and – no less important – how the chieftain or king could distinguish friend from foe. My comments include some basic correction or expansion on facts, but should first and foremost be viewed as further 'food for thought' and reminders of some aspects that have a bearing on the interpretation.

Baastrup correctly points to the extreme fragility of many of the gold foil figures which makes a use as 'coinage' highly unlikely. However, it should be added that a few foils (both male and female figures) have been mounted (strengthened) with a backing of thicker gold or bronze sheet with a loop attached. Distinct traces of wear along the edges confirm their occasional use as pendants. This could point to a function as 'identification' tokens or 'signs of honour' worn for all to see or maybe as amulets.

A large number of foils particularly from Sorte Muld had been 'spent' (?) and subsequently deliberately folded and even hammered (for melting/re-use?) – a fact that does not necessarily contradict Baastrup's hypothesis. As she also points out – a token of this kind could very easily change hands without the

person who issued the 'invitation' being aware – let alone in control – of this. If the gold foils, on the other hand, had been used in the same way as later 'pilgrim's badges', I suspect that the spatial distribution would have been different (less concentrated on central sites).

Baastrup touches on the production, and although I agree that the manufacture of a small detailed die (*patrix*) by the *cire perdue*-technique requires skill, many dies are best described as amateurish in quality and could have been produced by any reasonably able bronze caster. The map of die-links ([Figure 1](#)) suggests that 'sharing' (i.e. transport) of the most detailed and popular dies appears to have taken place between allied chieftains (central places), for example, between Sorte Muld and Uppåkra.

At Sorte Muld alone there are 440 different dies (out of a Scandinavian total of c. 750). Most dies are represented by only one or two gold foils while occasional figures are known in more than 100 die-identical copies. Nearly 100 pieces with a wide distribution within southern Scandinavia have been fashioned individually – most of them crudely cut out or scratched on a thicker gold sheet ([Figure 2 \(a\)](#)). These were very likely 'home-made' – and as such do not fit into a use as 'officially issued' tokens of identification or invitation.

A small correction (p. 9) may be relevant for Baastrup's discussion, as the latest count shows

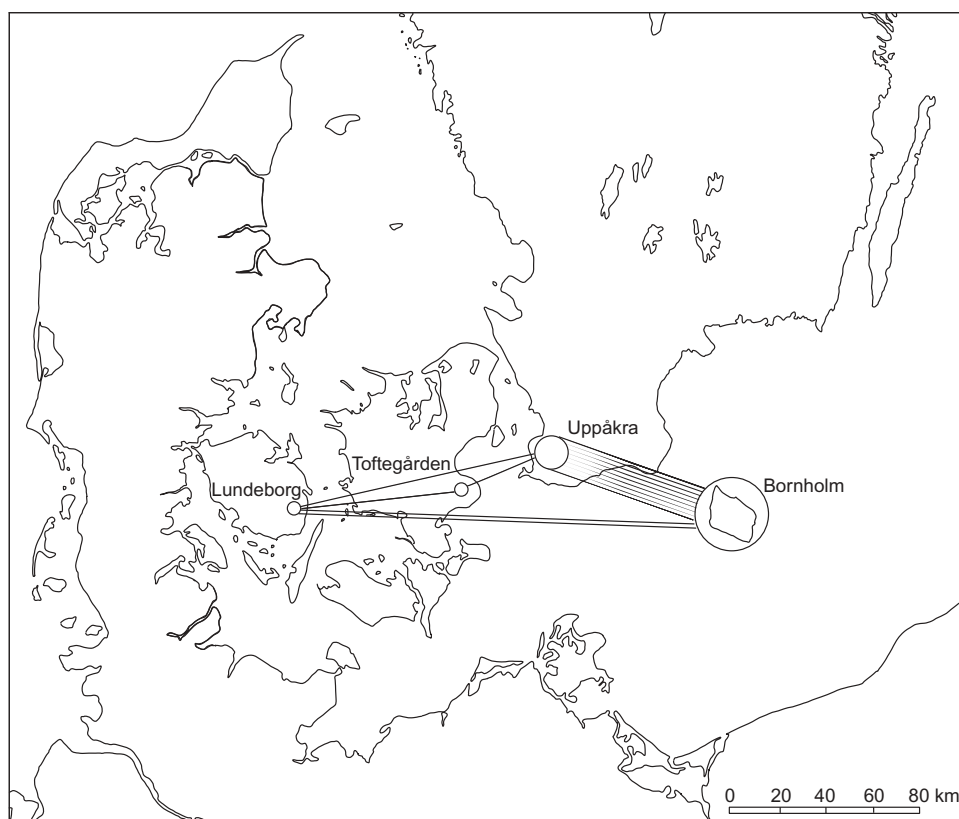


Figure 1. Die-links in southern Scandinavia. Drawing: M. Watt.

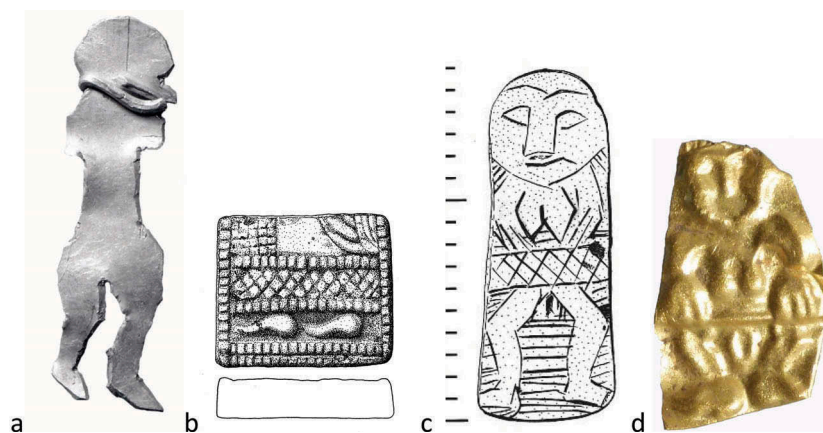


Figure 2. (a) Crudely cut-out gold foil figure (with added neck ring) from Sorte Muld, Bornholm; (b) lower half of a die (*patrix*) with secondary use as a weight from Neble, Sjælland; (c) gold foil with scratched female figure (Bornholm with no further provenance); (d) stamped foil with the same motif as c. Photo: Nationalmuseet, Copenhagen (a), Bornholms Museum (d). Drawings: M. Watt.

that 10 dies (out of a total of 20) are found in places where gold foil figures have also been recorded. Of these three dies are from the Sorte Muld area. One of the dies from the Neble-area incidentally has had a secondary use as a weight (Figure 2(b)). To find the often worn and

corroded dies, we are first and foremost dependent on skilled and knowledgeable detectorists.

Bastrup barely touches on the iconographic content of the gold foils. Some dies are very detailed with an apparent 'message' meant to be understood by the initiated with a clear link to Late Antique iconography;

on others the motif is barely recognisable (Watt 2015a, 2015b). A small number of single figures (mostly from one locality) are naked and some of them sexually loaded(?) (Figure 2(c,d)). The naked figures seem particularly difficult to place within Baastrup's theory, unless they were invitations to a sexual orgy (no sarcasm intended). How do the figure-foils with two persons (man–woman pairs) fit the picture, with their dissimilar iconographic content and different spatial distribution from the single-figure foils? What about the animals? Several animal-foils depict a boar. Do they perhaps represent the 'consecrated (i.e. sacrificial) boar' mentioned in the Frankish (Merovingian) law texts, *Lex Salica* (II, 17)?

Disentangling the iconographic diversity and possible symbolism of the gold foil figures is complex and touches on themes ranging from the dress code of Late Antiquity and Early Christian iconography and from legal to 'pagan' gesture language etc. – all fascinating but well beyond the scope of a short discussion.

It is now nearly 300 years since the first scientific study of gold foil figures appeared (von Melle 1725),

and it is amazing how these tiny images can still provoke new ideas.

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