

Alexandra Pesch & Michaela Helmbrecht (eds)

*Gold Foil Figures in Focus: A Scandinavian Find Group and Related Objects and Images from Ancient and Medieval Europe*

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Review by Neil Price

The gold foil figures found across Scandinavia from the end of the Migration Period into the eighth century are among the most enigmatic material manifestations of late Iron Age thought. As the editors of this marvellous collection summarise them, ‘small artefacts, about the size of a fingernail and made of embossed gold foil [...] anthropomorphic figures: males and females, and some with unclear gender, dressed or undressed, singles or pairs, very rarely animals. Some are elaborately designed, others are roughly cut’.

Almost 4000 examples are now known from about fifty Scandinavian find spots, more than 2700 foils coming from Sorte Muld on Bornholm alone. Over the past half century and more they have been the subject of numerous studies, focussed mostly on individual localities such as hall buildings or on larger deposits, and occasionally in more thematic treatments that explore aspects of their nature and meaning. What are they, these tiny beings in their little bordered spaces? There has been no shortage of suggestions over the years – dedications to the Powers, foundation sacrifices, symbols of a sacred marriage between gods and giants or ‘Scandinavians’ and Sámi, tokens of political alliances, even aristocratic ‘business cards’ emblematic of conspicuous hospitality, and many more. The visual codes of the foils have also been considered – the figures’ gestures, bodies,

and clothes, to take but a few more recent approaches. But until now there has been little attempt at a really overarching survey, perhaps inevitably so given the dynamic nature of a finds category with a corpus that expands on an almost monthly basis.

This volume is the first publication from the Centre for Baltic and Scandinavian Archaeology (ZBSA) project on the gold foils, which began in 2015; the papers collected here result from its first workshop, held in 2017. The book is impeccably produced in hardback, fully in line with the previous publications in this impressive series, printed on glossy photographic paper and illustrated in colour throughout. One of the workshop's primary functions was to attempt to set the foils in their wider cultural context both within and beyond Scandinavia, and in particular to assess the degree of external influence on their figurative art and visual culture more generally; the original workshop also included several scholars who did not contribute papers to the eventual volume, among them the late Jan Peder Lamm whose work on the Swedish finds is of fundamental importance. As the editors make clear in their introduction, the task they set themselves posed special challenges given the lack of a formal catalogue of the foils. It is to the immense credit of Alexandra Pesch and Michaela Helmbrecht (and the advance-planning structure of the ongoing ZBSA seminar series) that they have not merely succeeded, but triumphed.

After the introduction, the book begins with a magisterial essay by Margrethe Watt, the product of decades of study by the best guide one could wish for into the world of the foils. Summarising their distribution, chronology, manufacture, relationships, and iconographic features, this contribution alone is worth the book. Watt's survey is followed by sixteen papers organised in four sections, focussing respectively on the Scandinavian imagery, a comparison with motifs from other contexts, a discussion of warrior symbolism, and a contextual study of research history (the latter focussing heavily on the hieros gamos and Karl Hauck's work). An admirable feature of the volume, in the light of persistent dogmatism in so many arenas of archaeology, is its resolute refusal to seek or impose consistency in the contributions. It seems obvious that we do not know the full purposes and meanings of the foils, so why pretend that we do? What is on offer here is a perfect menu of ideas, observations, insights, and interpretations.

Among the highlights? A series of superb colour maps showing all finds of gold foils to date (where they are not is as interesting as where they are), including breakdowns by type, and the locations of patrices; the obvious but often overlooked materiality of the foils, so fragile that whatever their function it cannot have included regular handling; superb overviews of gestural expression, human imagery and clothing in late Iron Age and Roman Imperial art (Kristoffersen, Magnus, Gampp, Wamers, Fischer); three-di-

mensional ‘relatives’ of the foil figures (Zachrisson); Vendel-Viking continuities in the cross-context imagery of the foils (Helmbrecht); a study of the foils’ frames and borders (Behr); pair symbolism (Sundqvist); and much more, not least hundreds of beautiful colour images of the foils themselves, along with a veritable cornucopia of contemporary motifs. The sections on external comparisons are less successful to my mind, simply because they extend in so many directions (and back into Roman times) that it is sometimes hard to bring the immense amount of data into sufficient resolution, but the excellent papers here clearly make the point that it is impossible to meaningfully study the foils in cultural isolation. Helmbrecht’s chapter on figural repoussé works – linking to aspects of her 2011 thesis – is especially important.

The volume concludes with a second joint essay by the editors, in which they address the useful clarification of terminology, the role of gold above other metals, and the tensions between mass production and what they call individualisation. Above all they seek a ‘Northern way of imagery’ in which several very sharp observations are made (why, for instance, are there so few depictions of buildings, landscapes or furniture in the art?), not the least of which is the massive presence of what appear to be women in contrast to the visual record of previous centuries. To my mind some points remained either unresolved or at least still prone to assumption – for example, I am not quite so confident that the majority of the figures (and their clothing, gestures etc) can be gendered in binary terms, or that we can be so definitive in saying that ‘being the image’ was their sole purpose. Similarly, I was a little surprised to read the final conclusion which rather neatly locates the entire tradition of the foils broadly within the ‘turbulence’ of the Vendel/Merovingian period following the climate crisis of the mid-sixth century, though they also see them as evidence of recovery and cultural resilience. But this is all part of the debate, which continues.

It is hard to overstate the importance of this book: it is a landmark in early medieval studies, and a must for anyone interested in the intersection of material culture and the intangible aspects of the time, both for the gold foils and beyond. After two readings, I have only begun to digest its contents and it is the kind of book that will become dog-eared through frequent use. I have no idea of the print run, but I suspect it will sell out fast; get a copy while you can.