

## THE MAGICIAN AND HIS CRAFT

The intensive study of gold bracteates, conducted over the last decades, has led to significant insights into the thought patterns of the Germanic nations and has pointed to a continuity of belief from the time of oral transmission to the times of the written sources. The artifacts are found as grave gifts or votive offerings, and belong chiefly to southern Scandinavia, especially Denmark, but also to Germany and are dated to migratory times (fourth to sixth century).

The small objects, each possess an ear, and thus were worn as amulets and we might expect them to have a protective function. And they often bear such apotropaic signs as swastikas, apotropaic knots, or triskeles. The image usually appears on one side only; it is modelled on the image of the emperor on Roman coins of the Christian era. Gradually Germanic elements were included, and the picture itself was changed into various forms: into a full figure, or a figure surrounded by beasts; sometimes and entire scene with various actors is depicted.

Since the magical function of the objects seems assured, and since they were frequently discovered near sacred sites they were related to Germanic faith. Karl Hauck interprets almost all amulets with reference to Óðinn, a magician and the ruler of his group, a priest and king who is shown at various poignant moments of his life: sacrificing himself or sacrificing his son Baldr, or healing an injured horse.

Elmer Seebold, on the other hand, believes that the original context had not lost its validity, and that the human profile of the coins which signifies the emperor, was transformed into the Germanic king, who might be of sacral stature.

Not disputing the magical function of the amulets, nor their relation to the magician or the magician god's craft, I wish to offer alternative interpretations of some scenes from those given by Karl Hauck. The images which I have chosen can also no longer be related to an emperor's position.

The amulets, shown in the illustrations, share a number of elements. They portray a single male figure, possessing a mustache, his legs in movement, as if running or leaping, his chest showing two sets of concentric circles. In all but one the right hand is raised towards his chin

and the left hand lowered towards his genitals. In illustration four the right hand is raised and the left extended; three phantastic, snakelike animals entwine and surround the man. In contrast to the others, this bracteate is devoid of runic signs.

Some of the positions are also encountered on other bracteates: the leaping man, the raised hand, the snakelike beings. I have selected my examples on the basis of the puzzling feature of concentric circles on the man's chest.

In 1970 Karl Hauck interpreted this element as a portrayal of female breasts to which indeed they show close resemblance. He pointed to an analogue on a bronze plate of Luristan in Assyria on which a breasted man, as he is dancing, holds a snake in his uplifted hand. Hauck saw both, the Germanic and the Mediterranean form, as a primeval being - **Urvater** - who contains both sexes within himself, and in whom the human race originated, as in the giant Ymir of Germanic myth.

He no longer holds this view; he sees the concentric circles as male nipples; the hand positions are interpreted as those of pledging an oath. In pre-Christian times, as Hauck affirms, oaths might be rendered on hair, beard, or sexual organ. And thus he attributes to the figure a state of regenerative ecstasy - **Regenerationsextase** - in which the hands in the gesture of giving a pledge call upon the spirit world. In the catalogue of amulets the scene is labelled: God in pledging an oath.

In a recent publication, however, Hauck changed his mind; the gesture is that of one who calls out: a **Rufer**. He bases this conclusion on a hoard of newly discovered images on gold plate which contain a similar motif.

With his altered view Hauck now believes that the man surrounded by snakes (ill.4) experiences a crisis; he is threatened by three demonic beings; and he is described as man fighting demons - **Mann im Dämonenkampf**. The event symbolizes a shaman's initiatory ordeal, in which he is devoured by a monster, but also his return to a new reality.

I question these interpretations on several grounds. I do not dispute the position of the right hand, raised to the chin, as that of giving a pledge, calling out, or bestowing the benefit of blessing or of healing. I cannot share the view that the left takes part in these activities. Both hands are raised in blessing or in healing, and only one hand is employed in pronouncing an oath. Certainly the left hand is not used in giving pledges. The lowering of the left hand is difficult to explain. One can only state descriptively that it points to or hides the male sexual organ.

I venture to assert that cuplike elevations on the human chest almost universally mark a female being. Male nipples may be shown in realistic portrayals. The bracteates are symbolic and schematic. If the circles are not of female breasts they are of nipples which are emphasized and pathologically enlarged. If an element is emphasized or distorted some significance must be accorded to this fact. Since we deal with a sexual characteristic (in the female breast) the significance would be of a sexual nature. The assumption of sexual significance is supported by the gesture of the left hand which hides or points to the male genitals.

Let us note that in all bracteates of this discussion the man is in motion, running, walking or leaping, and such action occurring throughout bracteate iconology is held to be symbolic of the twirls and twists, the frenzied dance, which create and also express the ecstatic state of the magician. Symbols of apotropaic significance, swastikas, triskeles, runes, are also present to point to the magical nature of the scene. I suggest that the bracteates of this discussion show a magician with perverted sexual characteristics in the performance of his craft.

I cannot share the view that the figure of illustration 4 is surrounded by voracious demons. If he were in mortal struggle he would not continue in his dance. One snakelike beast dangles from his arm, another crouches at the edge; a third indeed encircles the man's waist; but he, his head thrown back in the rhythm of his movement, does not even notice his 'attacker'. His hands are open and he does not grasp the 'ferocious' beasts. In depictions of closely related scenes (Sjöhagen-B, and Sievern-B) only two snakes are seen, and these hang loosely from the dancer's arms. Even if Germanic tradition contained a tale in which the magician good is swallowed by a monster (and it does not), he surely would not be threatened by three demonic beings simultaneously.

I suggest, in similarity to Hauck's earlier view, that on this bracteate the magician is entangled and entwined in a circle of protective creatures. a protective knot, formed of similar demonic beings, is also seen, for instance, on a picture stone of the cemetery of Smiss (När), as shown in ill. 5. The man of Nebenstedt-B possesses, like the other examples, female breasts or pathologically enlarged nipples. No genitals are shown. He moves in an ecstatic dance; he is surrounded by apotropaic beasts. I consider him, like the others, as a sexually abnormal being in the performance of a magic act.

Sexual abnormality and sexual perversion in the performance of a magic act is encountered as a topos throughout ancient and modern

cultures. The complex is well documented for eastern Siberia. It is believed by these reindeer herding people that a change of sex will increase a shaman's powers. While a woman may attempt to accept male features, the change from man to woman is more frequently encountered. In the first stage of transformation the man wears women's garments and seeks the company of women. In the second stage he becomes 'soft and helpless'. In the third stage he may take a 'husband'. This transformation is designated as *yrka-laul-vairgin*. Similar beliefs prevail among the Koryaks in whose myths a transformed shaman may even give birth to children.

Among the Yakuts of the district of Kolyma the magician combs and plaits his hair in a female fashion, and a woman's hat is worn by the shaman of the Samoyeds. The north American tribes of the Souk, the Dakota, and the Fox hold a feast, the *i-coo-coo-a*, in which a Berdache, a man in woman's clothes, is elected. He is considered as a sacred healer.

The Iwampus of the Californian Yuki, whose name means 'man-woman', are wandering priests. Among the Pueblo of New Mexico a man is elected in each village who is systematically made effeminate and impotent. He plays a role of great importance in the springtime festival. The notion appears also in areas surrounding the Pacific Ocean. The homosexual *basire* of Borneo are highly respected and function as sorcerers and healers. The belief in the potency of a male-female being also found expression among the caste of the Valabha of India who especially worship Krishna; here the spiritual leaders dress in women's garments when they officiate in cult.

The phenomenon of ritual sex change is also discernible in sophisticated societies. The male *kurgaru* of the Akkadian Ishtar dressed as women in her festival. Herodotus describes the Scythian *enares*, men in women's clothes, whom he designates as *androgynoi*. They had received their gift of divination from the goddess Aphrodite. When they despoiled her sanctuary in Ascalon they were struck in punishment with the 'woman's sickness'. Hippocrates understands this disease to be a form of impotence occasioned by excessive riding of horses.

The castrated priests of Cybele wandered in women's garments through the provinces to proclaim the glory of their goddess. Wearing robes of silk, their hair dyed blond, curled and pomaded, they would use cosmetics to enhance the beauty of their eyes, and carry mirrors in the way of women. Like the Germanic Óðinn they were healers and diviners;

they uttered their prophecies in verse, and they destroyed noxious vermin, a function attributed to Woden in an Anglosaxon charm.

The Greek soothsayer Tiresias once saw two snakes, as they mated. He struck and killed the male beast and was transformed into a woman. Later he struck the female and regained his former sex. In the celebrations of the Thracian goddess Kotys cultic dances were performed by her priests who were dressed in women's clothes and whom the Greeks called **hemigynoi** - half-women.

We note that the phenomenon arises in a wide variety of geographic regions and that the perversion may assume various forms: homosexuality, transvestism, impotence due to castration. Sometimes it is believed that the condition was ordained by a superhuman being, as among the Koryaks. We can only speculate about the origin of the belief. It may be that any deviation from the norm was thought to constitute a source of sacred power, or also, that a union of male and female elements in one person would create a superior being.

Elements of this belief were clearly present in Germanic tradition. The **seiðr**, a magic seánce, was accompanied by **ergi** - 'perversion', according to the Saga of the Ynglings:

Óðinn knew the skill... which is called seiðr... This magic entails so much perversion when it is performed that it is not without shame for manly men.

In **Gísla Saga Súrssonar** a man is asked to work a spell; he proceeds and

...makes himself a scaffold and works this magic with all its obscenity and devilry.

Óðinn, the master of the **seiðr**, is reproached by Loki for his perversion, and for having acted like a sorceress:

You beat the (**vétt**?) as wise women do. In a wizard's shape you traversed the world and I thought this much perversion.

In an exchange of insults between Þórr and Óðinn the latter is addressed as **inn ragi** - 'pervert'. Óðinn also used magic to seduce the woman Rindr. In his rendition of this event Saxo Grammaticus relates that Óðinn impersonated a woman as one of his stratagems. The presence of cultic

perversion may also be suspected from Tacitus' observation about the High Priest of the Naharvali who 'dresses like a woman'.

We realize, on the other hand, that homosexuality and effeminate behaviour were much despised in Norse society, that dressing in the garments of the other sex was an offence against the law in Iceland. We do not know whether this contempt arose in response to religious practices or in a secular environment.

If we recall the prevalence of a figure in ecstatic dance on the bracteates we might consider the possibility that the *ergi*, the 'perversion' of the magic séance, was embodied in a dance which exhibited, possibly, obscene gestures, or the imitation of female behaviour, or the imitation of perverted intercourse.

Realizing that belief in the value of cultic perversion existed, to some extent, in Germanic tradition, especially in association with the magician god, we may understand that the image of a ritually perverted being in his ecstatic dance was indeed able to impart powerful protective function to the amulet.

If the ecstatic dancer of the bracteates, possibly pointing in an obscene gesture to his genitals, possibly wearing a woman's garment or disguise, may indeed be related to the *ergi* of the *seiðr* then the study of the bracteates has led to a deeper understanding of the texts.



Ill. 1  
Allesø-B, IK 13,1



Ill. 2  
Nebenstedt II, IK 129,1



Ill. 3  
Darum IV-B, IK129,2

Ill. 4  
Nebenstedt-B  
IX 308



Ill. 5  
picture stone  
of Nâr(Smiss),  
Gotland

