

Invitation systems and identification in Late Iron Age southern Scandinavia? The gold foil figures from a new perspective

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ABSTRACT

The ability to identify oneself has always been important, because people in all periods entered into relationships in which their role depended upon their identity. This must have been of great importance to long-distance connections in prehistory, in cases where people did not know the appearance of the foreign individuals they were to connect with. The aim of this article is to present an idea of how a system of identification may have been established. It is intended as 'food for thought' on the subject. Gold foil figures could have played a role in prehistoric invitation systems, the identification of a person's true identity and in the dependency upon magnates in southern Scandinavia during the 6th–8th centuries AD. The gold foil figures may have been tokens issued by the magnate and served as invitations to special events, at a time when there was apparently a preoccupation with organising cult activities at the elite residences and restricting places at and admission to such events. The figures did not guarantee that it was the right guests who arrived on these occasions, but presenting this type of token may have minimised the risk of allowing in impostors.

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In today's society, it is very important that people can identify themselves. This is achieved using passports, identification documents and databases, through large quantities of personal data stored in loyalty schemes in local supermarkets or criminal records, and not least via use of a person's own network, involving friends and family, who are familiar with their appearance, voice and behaviour. But our friends' friends can also identify us as individuals from photos, comments and conduct in various social media. People, who we do not actually know, can easily obtain photos and information about us online. It seems more important than ever to be able to prove who you are and what rights you have. Who are you, are you entitled to participate in referendums, receive medical assistance or be buried as a member of the state church?

This fundamental need for people to be able to identify themselves must also have been important in all periods, because during these periods, people entered into relationships in which their role depended upon their identity. This must have been of even greater importance to long-distance connections. The division between the terms local and non-

local can always be debated, but here 'long-distance connections' are defined as those in which people have difficulties identifying individuals based upon their appearance, because they see them rarely or have never seen them before.

For some groups of people, connections between Jutland, Funen and Zealand in Denmark may have been regarded as 'long-distance connections'. Meanwhile, other well-travelled, or internationally oriented, groups may have had to have participated in international relations before they considered them to be 'long distance'. No matter which group a person belonged to, the 'long-distance connections' included contact with other people that they did not have the opportunity to see regularly. These were people that they were not able to identify or recognise based upon their physical characteristics, as appearance changes over time. In addition, a memory or image of a person was difficult to record in a prehistoric society.

A person's reputation, character and identity might easily have been documented in the local or regional relationships of local people, but this did not apply to long-distance relationships, where local

people did not know the appearance of the foreign person they were going to communicate with. A magnate in the Iron Age needed confirmation of his adversary's personal identity when entering into an alliance with him, undertaking political negotiations or agreeing to a marriage involving his daughter. How did this work in prehistory? How could people at all social levels be certain that other individuals really were who they claimed to be, when dealing with strangers they had never met before?

The aim of this article is to suggest an idea of how such a system of identification may have been established using material culture. It will focus upon gold foil figures as a specific object type that may have played a role in prehistoric invitation systems, the identification of a person's true identity and not least in the dependency upon magnates. Gold foil figures are cited as an example here as these objects exhibit an appearance, distribution and function that indicate they played an important role in Late Iron Age cult activities.

Gold foil figures – a short introduction

Gold foil figures are small gold sheets featuring cut-out or stamped images (Watt 1999a, 2004, 2008; Helmbrecht 2013, p. 9). These images often depict men and women, but a few images of animals have also been identified. They are not found outside Scandinavia (Watt 1999c, p. 174; Mannering 2006). The dating of these figures is still a subject of debate, but most scholars believe that they were in use from the middle of the 6th century AD and production ceased in the 8th century (Figures 1–2) (Watt 1999a, p. 138; Axboe 2005, p. 51, Helmbrecht 2013).

It is hard to imagine that the fragile gold foil figures, with an average weight of 0.1 grams (Watt 1999b, p. 188), played an important role as a means of payment or exchange, or had any other practical function. Watt (2008, p. 52f) argues that their pictorial content involves a high degree of symbolism and that they were specially made for cult activities. At the site of Sorte Muld on Bornholm, Denmark, they are concentrated in the central part of the settlement area. Over 2480 figures were found at this site (Watt 2008, p. 43), which is the largest known concentration from any location.

A possible link between gold bracteates and the gold foil figures should be mentioned, in which the

gold bracteates are regarded as the temporal and cultic predecessors of the foil figures (Axboe 2007, p. 155f). There is also no doubt that the gold foil figures emerged from the same environment and cult system as the bracteates, and the two object types have much in common. But in functional terms, there are many differences between the two groups: they are two very different artefact types with differing distribution, contexts, use and slightly different dating. The most important difference in this discussion is perhaps the 'longer life' of the bracteates and their function as pendants. Several bracteates have been repeatedly reused, as displayed by severely worn suspension loops (Axboe 2001, p. 120), in contrast with the



Figure 1. Gold foil figures from Ved Sylten and Smøringe on Bornholm. Photo: Lennart Larsen.

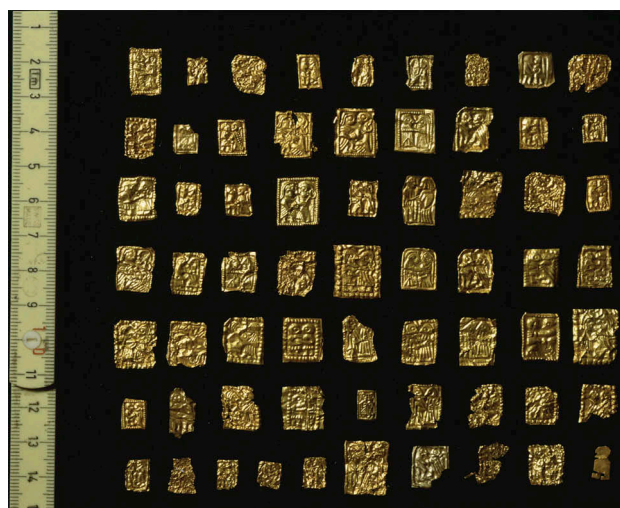


Figure 2. Gold foil figures from Lundeborg, near Gudme on Funen. Photo: Lennart Larsen.

gold foil figures, which do not show traces of wear (Helmbrecht 2013, p. 12). It has been extensively debated as to whether some of the bracteates, with their formulaic runic inscriptions, can be interpreted as loyalty gifts from kings, that enabled the issuing of invitations, the holding of feasts in honour of the gods and the establishment of friendships and alliances (see Andrén 1991; regarding this debate, see Axboe 2001, p. 123ff). This subject is far too multifaceted and complex, however, to go into detail with here. If some of the bracteates do highlight the ability of the magnates to invite people to, and to hold, religious and political feasts, it might also be tempting to view the gold foil figures as ‘the successors’ of the bracteates, as this would suggest a genuine Late Iron Age preoccupation with invitations (and invitation systems?) over a longer time span. It would demonstrate an interest in possessing the power or position to invite people to different feasts. It is to be hoped that future research will illuminate this area further, whilst at present, it remains the subject of interesting and intriguing speculation.

There appears to be a very clear connection between the gold foil figures and cultic activities at a number of the major Iron Age sites in southern Scandinavia. At Uppåkra in Sweden, more than 100 gold foil figures (122 in 2004) and 5 dies were recovered. Several of these were associated with a ‘ceremonial building’ (Helmbrecht 2013, p. 9ff). At Helgö, Sweden, 26 gold foil figures were found in the central part of the settlement (in building group 2, foundation I, which includes a building dating to the 6th–8th centuries AD). The gold foil figures were found together with two gold bracteates, a silver bowl with a Christian cross motif and a Mediterranean (possibly Coptic) bronze ladle (Lamm 2004; Jørgensen 2009, p. 334f). Building group 2 is also interpreted as having been where special or cult activities were undertaken (Jørgensen 2009, p. 335). A similar pattern is associated with some of the major sites in Denmark that have produced gold foil figures, particularly Sorte Muld on Bornholm, Gudme on Funen, where a few gold foil figures have been found, the nearby harbour area of Lundeborg, where 102 have been recovered (Michaelsen 2015, p. 175), and Toftegård on Zealand with its total of eight gold foil figures (Tornbjerg 1998, p. 227; Baastrup in prep.).

Several studies of gold foil figures have focused upon their iconographic content. Some interpretations have highlighted the gold foil figures as representing individual gods, whose names are known from later written sources (Hauck 1992, 1993, 1998), and some have also suggested that the gold foil figures depict shamans performing rituals (Back Danielsson 1999, 2007). Other researchers are more reluctant to identify the gold foil figures as representing specific gods or people (Helmbrecht 2011, p. 112ff, 2013, p. 11). The figures have also been analysed to enhance our knowledge of Iron Age clothes and gender (Watt 2003; Mannering 2004, 2006, 2008, 2012, 2013; Mannering and Andersson Strand 2008). Watt regards the figures as tangible evidence of communication between humans and gods. She states that what most religious ceremonies have in common is the desire to come into contact with the gods – perhaps to deal with an emergency, to get help or to ask for advice about the future. The ‘payment’ for these services could be made using the gold foil figures. Watt emphasises that the cult activities at Sorte Muld were most likely to have been controlled and performed by the local magnate (Watt 2008, p. 53).

There are many ways in which the figures can be interpreted, but whether or not they represent gods, payment or something completely different, there is little doubt that they should be seen as an important element in aspects of the cultic or ritual sphere of the Late Iron Age. They are primarily found at locations where pre-Christian cultic and ceremonial activities were performed. This is significant when discussing their role in the invitation systems of the Iron Age and their possible function as a means of identifying selected individuals.

Invitation systems in the Iron Age?

In the last decade, archaeological investigations have revealed significant evidence of social activities undertaken at so-called central places or elite residences in southern Scandinavia. People interacted in various ways at assembly sites, such as Tissø, Uppåkra and Toftegård, their activities including trade, diplomacy and cultic activities (Jørgensen 2002, 2003; Larsson 2004). Such locations were used for assemblies at a local, regional, interregional and international level. These sites and their related

functions were the backbone of a society in transition from a tribal system to a realm. The precondition for these activities, however, was that people really were who they said they were. It had to be the right people who attended the various events. It was crucial for the magnate that he was negotiating with the right person and not an imposter. In a similar way, it was vital that the right people participated in the cult or ceremonial activities. We do not know the circumstances of these activities, but there are numerous indications they were undertaken by the magnates. Rituals took place at their settlements and the rituals were most likely controlled by the elite (Jørgensen 2002, p. 215ff, 2009). The gold foil figures can be seen in this context as a means of ensuring the identities of the invited and participating persons. Today, various invitation systems exist. An invitation system is a method of encouraging people to join an organisation – it may be a website, a club or the intranet for parents of children at a local school. It is often a system in which new members are chosen, they cannot just apply. Sometimes existing members can receive a number of invitations, perhaps in the form of tokens, to enable others to join the service. In a similar way, some objects from the past can be seen as a type of ‘token’ – an invitation to attend a specific event, which was also evidence that the invited person really was the correct individual. This may have been the case with the gold foil figures.

The gold foil figures can be interpreted as invitations or rather ‘tokens’ from the magnate. The token would allow access to rituals or ceremonies. If a person received this golden token from the magnate, he or she was selected to be a part of the event. These ‘gold tokens’, if brought to the site of the event, for instance the magnate’s hall, would be the proof that allowed access. In this way, the gold foil objects could emphasise the individual’s social importance and position. In addition, the token could play an active part in the ritual as a votive gift. These two functions are not mutually exclusive.

A comparable example of tokens used in association with rituals is known from the Temple of Bel (dedicated on April 6, AD 32), in Palmyra, Syria. At this site, the Palmyranians performed annual rituals. During these rituals, priests and participants walked in a procession, carrying

statues of the gods. Animal sacrifices and ritual banquets connected with these processions were held within the temple complex. Participation in events such as the banquets was strictly controlled through the use of terracotta tokens (*tesserae*), which were only issued to the priests who served in the temple and a few selected citizens. The Temple of Bel had a dining room in which the invited participants ate sacrificial meats (Colledge 1976, p. 11, 29, 54f; Al-As’ad *et al.* 2005; Raja 2015).

It is possible that the Nordic gold foil figures, despite the differences in terms of geography and dating, can be seen in the same way as at the tokens used at Palmyra; they were part of a strictly controlled invitation system, granting the right people access to various ceremonial events. The requirement for invitation systems has apparently existed



Figure 3. a–b Terracotta tokens from Palmyra (now in the collection of Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek); they functioned as invitations and could grant people access to rituals and feasts at the Temple of Bel. Photo: Rubina Raja.

in every period and in all geographical regions of the world. There is no doubt there are significant differences between southern Scandinavia and Syria in terms of dating, cultural contexts and religious systems. However, some features are recognisable in both places. The Temple of Bel contained restricted areas, where only certain people were allowed in, ritual feasts were held and animal sacrifices were made. These are elements that we can also identify at southern Scandinavian sites. In addition, it is worth noting that food, presumably including ritual meals, was also part of the Scandinavian elite's ceremonial sphere. At the magnate's halls at Gudme, Tissø and Lejre on Zealand, for instance, a number of deposits of bones and burnt stones can be interpreted as the remains of ritual meals and sacrifices (Jørgensen 2009, p. 334, 343ff; Christensen 2015, p. 173ff.). Furthermore, as will be emphasised later, it was of great importance at the South Scandinavian elite residences to organise space and control the movement of people in the central and cult areas. Different people had access to different parts of the cult areas at the residences. This is a pattern that can be identified at numerous religious sites from various periods and geographical areas, including Palmyra.

The argument is not that Syria and South Scandinavia are alike – they clearly are not. But this example has been chosen to emphasise the possibility of certain elements from different environments appearing in various different geographical locations. Religious elements that are found all over the world include the sacrificing of animals, processions, religious tokens and control of the movement of people.

The use of religious tokens for different purposes appears to be one of these elements found in various temporal and geographical contexts. Another well-known example of this is the pilgrim badge (Andersson 1989). These medieval artefacts, which are commonly found throughout Europe, are often made of pewter or other lead alloys. The badge's main purpose was to certify that the owner had travelled to a specific place on a ritual journey. The badge could document that an individual had visited a particular location for a specific religious purpose. Thus, they apparently differ from the gold foil figures in that the badges document participation in religious activities that have already been completed. Similar to the

terracotta tokens, the pilgrim badges belong to another religious system, time and cultural context than the gold foil figures. But they are nevertheless examples of artefacts with no practical purpose, which could be easily broken, and which were associated with a cultic context and were exclusively associated with documenting the individual's participation in cult activities, either before or after these occurred.

The mentioning of terracotta tokens and pilgrim badges is not intended to enable close comparisons to be drawn between these objects and the gold foil figures, but instead it is meant to emphasise that religious tokens linking a person's identity with certain cultic events are a universal phenomenon. There are many differences in the form, function and dating of the various types of tokens. But what they have in common is that they did not have a practical function, their production was controlled and they have been found at sites with documented cultic contexts and activity.

In debt to the magnate?

If the gold foil figures functioned as invitations from the magnate to a selected few to join certain events and the objects played a part in votive offerings, this would mean that the receivers became indebted to the magnate. The magnate would finance the receiver's votive offering to the gods and the receiver would then be under the magnate's influence when establishing alliances, undertaking political activity and negotiating social relations. Both parties could benefit from this relationship. This appears to display some similarities with the contemporary system associated with the so-called ring-swords. These swords had a ring attached to the pommel, which could symbolise a connection and commitment to a local ruler amongst the military elite of Europe (Figure 4) (Steuer 1987, p. 206ff.; Nørgård Jørgensen 1999, p. 197ff).

We cannot be sure how prehistoric invitation systems worked. What enabled access to various activities? What factors could result in an invitation? Was it a person's status, kinship, or physical or psychological traits? Or was it completely different factors? One thing is certain though: identifying yourself and your privileges was a challenge in



Figure 4. Ring-sword from Kyndby, Zealand. This type of sword, with its prominent ring on the pommel, could signal connection and commitment to the local ruler. Photo: Lennart Larsen.

prehistory. There were no lifelike images that could easily be transmitted and no databases to browse. Perhaps gold foil figures were used as tokens in such an invitation system, if only as the ‘final document’ proving upon arrival at the cult area that the person was actually part of the invited network and should be allowed to come in.

Amongst the gold foil figures, male figures are numerically dominant (Mannering and Andersson Strand, 2008, p. 55). However, this probably does not reflect the actual representation of the sexes at special activities during the Late Iron Age. We have no completely convincing interpretation models for the figures’ iconographic content and meaning. Therefore, it is unwise to draw too many conclusions on this basis as to whether the gender composition of the gold foil figures is accurate and represents that which existed in the cult activities of the Late Iron Age.

An intellectual network?

Gold foil figures were not well suited to circulation in large networks and to passing through many pairs of hands as they were too fragile. These objects were intended for quick transactions from one person to another. They were taken out of circulation as soon as they were deposited, often in a cultic context, after their possessor had arrived at a certain event and deposited the figure.

The production and use of the gold foil figures must have been controlled by the elite. Producing gold foil figures required both access to gold and the expertise of skilled goldsmiths. But it depended, in particular, upon knowledge, of how to use and understand them, and of how to decode their symbolic meaning. From this perspective, the gold foil figures are a powerful indicator that network relations were developed to a high social and intellectual level. To be able to use gold foil figures correctly, an individual had to be a member of a network, whose members were familiar with, understood and accepted the use of such objects. The members of this network included some of the most important actors of the period: the elite represented at Sorte Muld, Gudme, Uppåkra and Toftegård. These network relations are emphasised even further by the fact that dies for foil figures have been found at Lundeberg, Uppåkra, Toftegård and Sorte Muld, indicating the existence of a die network in Scandinavia (Watt 2004, p. 215).

Minimising the risk?

The gold foil figures could not guarantee that the right people arrived at the events. They were not an absolute assurance of the holder’s identity. But presentation of a ‘golden token’ from the magnate might minimise the risk of letting in an unwanted guest or impostor. By presenting a gold figure at the entrance to an important event, it could not only signal that a person was, to some degree, part of a network, but also that they were connected with the magnate and possessed the privilege to participate. The same mechanism can be observed in modern life, in which access to different groups via ‘electronic tokens’ is offered in advance. This can take the form of a Facebook invitation, a login to your child’s school intranet or a membership card for a frequent

flyer programme. Tokens such as these – made of gold, plastic or electronic impulses – do not eliminate the risk of the wrong person gaining access, but they reduce it. Tokens make it more difficult for *personae non gratae* to enter. This may have applied in Iron Age society too. At a time when society depended upon people really being who they said they were, gold foil figures can be seen as part of an established invitation system to verify a person's identity, or at least to minimise the threat from tricksters. Gold foil figures display very distinctive characteristics: they were often associated with elite and cultic contexts, and apparently had no practical function. However, they may have been just one of several object types which played a role in prehistoric invitation systems or in systems aimed at identifying people.

Organising space

In summary, certain pieces of evidence may point towards a role for the gold foil figures in an invitation system. A substantial proportion of the figures ended up at sites containing clear indications of cultic activities. They have been found exactly in the places where the archaeological evidence for cult activities is very convincing – in association with the 'ceremonial buildings' at Uppåkra (Larsson and Lenntorp 2004) and Helgö (Jørgensen 2009, p. 334f), and within the central area at Gudme (Thrane 1998, p. 253ff), for instance.

Lars Jørgensen demonstrates (2009, p.329ff, 349:ff), on the basis of a number of examples from southern Scandinavia, how elite residences follow a distinct pattern when it comes to the organisation of the central areas of the large settlements and the pre-Christian cult. The magnate's main building is located here at all the complexes he describes (e.g. Gudme, Tissø, Lejre, Toftegård, Lisbjerg and Sorte Muld in Denmark, and Järrestad, Uppåkra and Helgö in Sweden). He argues that more or less all of the sites display a pattern in which this central building, the actual residence, is associated with a smaller building. In the case of Tissø, Järrestad, Toftegård, Lisbjerg and probably Sorte Muld, this smaller building is surrounded by fencing often joining the central building. He also argues that the main residences at Uppåkra, Helgö, Gudme and Lejre were accompanied by smaller buildings too

(see also Andrén, 2002, p. 315ff), but at these sites, no traces of fences were found. Such traces may have been destroyed by ploughing, or else the fences may never have existed. At the older complexes, such as Gudme, Jørgensen has suggested functional differences, in which the hall was for profane activities and the smaller building was preserved for sacral activities. He identifies a change in the general pattern of the complexes occurring around 6th–7th centuries, when some of the sacral functions moved into the halls.

The whole issue of spatial organisation and movement of cultic activities at the elite sites is far too complex to go into detail with here. But it is nevertheless important to keep these patterns in mind when discussing cultic activities and the related artefacts. This is because this strict organisation of the space, using fences and architecture, in the central parts of the elite residences reveals a very rigid way of organising the cult, the cultic areas and not least access to these sacral areas. There seems to have been a genuine preoccupation with controlling people's behaviour and patterns of movement. Areas were fenced in and cultic activities were allocated to special buildings. These places were deliberately isolated from their surroundings, and it does not seem plausible that all people were allowed into the restricted areas. Interestingly, it is particularly in these places, where strict spatial control was exercised, that the majority of the gold foil figures have been found. This type of organisation and mentality required an efficient way of controlling people and their access to certain areas. Therefore, an invitation system could have been very useful.

The gold foil figures are usually found at these elite residences and only rarely occur in other types of contexts, such as graves (Watt 1999c, p. 174). It is noteworthy that an artefact type, of which thousands of examples are known, displays such a uniform contextual pattern. This may indicate that their value was connected with the event they represented – either as an invitation or a votive gift. If they had functioned as invitations, their value would probably have been reduced after the gathering was over. The gold foil figures are made of microscopic amounts of gold and do not constitute 'treasure' in an economic sense, and even though they could have still represented a connection to the elite, such lavish invitations would have been most valuable when they

could be used as planned. A ticket to a performance is usually worth more before the event than afterwards. This might explain why we see such a distinct contextual pattern – the figures are found at places where they had value. Their value may have been based on the fact that they provided access to an intense event, or that they represented a votive gift, which could only be handed over to the gods on this occasion. This may be the reason why they are not found in graves and other contexts in which they could not fulfil these functions.

Control of production and movement of the foil figures

The production of gold foil figures must have been controlled. It is not a common type of artefact that would have been produced in many workshops. The access to gold, the specialised technique, integrated intellectual content, the understanding and acceptance of the use of the foil figures, as well as the contexts they have been recovered from, indicate that they were controlled by the elite in an organised network.

Upon initial examination, the gold foil figures exhibit visual consistency – they are all made of the same material, are small in size and generally depict people. Even though the iconographic content is rich and varied, their layout is standardised like other groups of mass-produced religious tokens. Watt has noted that on the basis of the products of at least 550–600 different dies, which are known of, the general impression is that the majority of foil figures belong to surprisingly stereotypical groups (Watt 1999c, p. 177).

If the gold foil figures played a role as tokens for personal identification in connection with participation in certain events, this could to a certain extent explain why they are often found at different places to the dies (Figure 5). The production occurred at a different location to the use and deposition. An element of an invitation system is that the tokens travel – their usage, significance and interpretation are associated with a network away from their original starting point.

The National Museum's collection contains eight dies which are registered as having been found in Denmark.¹ The majority of these were found in areas where no gold foil figures have been recovered.



Figure 5. A recently found die, from Neble, Zealand. It is stored in the National Museum's collection (Inv. no. C 39604). It was found using a metal detector in 2012 in an area where no gold foil figures have been found. Another die (Inv. no. C 32546) was found in the same area in the 1990s. Photo: the National Museum.

Two are from Neble, one is from Vester Egesborg and another from Flakkebjerg, which are all located in South and West Zealand. But the only recorded gold foil figures from Zealand, as previously mentioned, are from Toftegård in South-East Zealand. In addition, there is a die from Øster Vandet in North Jutland, but this is also an area without any known gold foil figures. According to Watt (2008, p. 44), the closest known gold foil figure is from the eastern part of the Limfjord region and not the western area, where Øster Vandet is located. Two of the three dies from Bornholm (Møllegård and Smørenge) were found at locations with known gold foil figures and the third one came from Sylten II, which is located close to the Sorte Muld site. It is interesting, however, that only one die has been found close to Sorte Muld – a site which holds 2480 of the approximately 3000 Scandinavian gold foil figures that are known of (Figure 6). The usage of figures at this site was very significant. The site has been intensively surveyed with metal detectors, so the chances of finding



Figure 6. A selection of gold foil figures from Sorte Muld. Photo: the National Museum.

dies here ought to be good, but still only one neighbouring example of a die has been recorded. The second largest find spot for gold foil figures, Uppåkra, has produced five dies (Helmbrecht 2013, p. 9), which shows a better balance between dies and gold foil figures. But from a Danish perspective, five out of the eight known dies have been found in areas with no gold foil figures whatsoever, and only three dies have been found on Bornholm, where 85% of all the known gold foil figures in Scandinavia have been found (Watt 2008, p. 45). This could reflect a ‘dynamic function’ – the figures acting as ‘messengers’ in an elite-controlled network to a final place of deposition at a cultic event. This would explain why at least five of the known dies from Denmark were found in areas lacking gold foil figures; they had been transported after production, and strict control of the artefact type ensured that scraps were not left behind, which is also a characteristic of tokens travelling in an invitation system. Tokens designed to function as messages in an invitation system do not need to be particularly durable and withstand the ravages of time. They are designed for only a few transactions and are subsequently deposited at a given event or place. But the hypothetical role of the gold foil figures as tokens does not rule out other interpretations, as mentioned above – the figures may have played both a role as votive gifts and invitations.

The gold foil figures are not found outside Scandinavia and are associated with a Nordic tradition. This part of the world was a non-literate society in the Late Iron Age. In a society where agreements were probably verbal, and not written down, one can imagine the importance of meeting up from time to

time, to revive and revitalise contracts and participate in special social and cult events. In an arrangement where people from distant places and from certain families met on a regular basis, it was of great importance to be able to identify people. Who would the various families send along? Had the person been seen before, or could a person be recognised if they had not been seen for 10 years? Late Iron Age society prioritised spatial organisation and was preoccupied with granting the right people access to specific places. This concern and mentality is reflected in the layout of all the central and cultic areas of the magnates’ residences of the period in South Scandinavia. Controlling and managing this required invitation systems, and the gold foil figures may have been one of the elements of such systems. In sum, the gold foil figures could have been an element of the invitation systems of the Late Iron Age and thus have had an actual and rather important function after all.

This is by no means a definitive interpretation of the function of the gold foil figures. At present, we cannot convincingly determine their function. This article instead offers ‘food for thought’ and is a contribution to the debate.

Note

1. The eight dies from the National Museum’s collections: (1) Møllegård, Klemensker Parish, Bornholm Nørre District, Bornholm County, C 31846, (2) Sylten 2, Ibsker Parish, Bornholm Øster District, Bornholm County, Inv. no. C 34255, (3) Smøenge, Vestermarie Parish, Bornholm Vester District, Bornholm County, Inv. no. C 35638, (4) Neble, Boeslunde Parish, Slagelse District, Sorø County, Inv. no. C 32546, (5) Neble,

Boeslunde Parish, Slagelse District, Sorø County, Inv. no. C 39604, (6) Vester Egesborg, Vester Egesborg Parish, Hammer District, Præstø County, Inv. no. C 34094, (7) Flakkebjerg, Flakkebjerg Parish, Vester Flakkebjerg District, Sorø County, Inv. no. C 37469 and (8) Øster Vandet, Øster Vandet Parish, Hillerslev District, Thisted County, Inv. no. C 40131.

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