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Ulla Mannering

## Dress in Scandinavian Iconography of the 5-10<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D.

### Introduction

At the third NESAT in York in May 1987 the now late Elisabeth Munksgaard from Denmark held a paper on the costumes depicted on Scandinavian gold sheet figures and in the following publication Munksgaard gave a short review of find-spots, possible dating and the different types of gold sheets found [Munksgaard 1990]. To a textile interested researcher it may not be completely clear why these small golden objects deserve so much attention but the answer lies in the carefully depicted clothes of the figures.

Among other results, Elisabeth Munksgaard's article has given inspiration to the PH.D research project "Dress in Scandinavian Iconography of the 5-10<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D." which is based on the assumption that iconography covers both a geographic and chronological spread, which makes them suitable for comparative textile studies. One aim of this research project is to make a thorough study of the many depictions of humans or human-like figures from the Late Scandinavian Iron Age, 5<sup>th</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D., and compare these with the surviving textile remains from the same period (see Table 1).

From late Scandinavian Iron Age there exists a considerable number of depictions of humans or human-like figures on many different materials and artefacts. Gold sheet figures are the largest single artefact group but also stones with carved pictures, runic stones, tapestries, jewellery, weapons and a wealth of single artefacts contain human-like depictions. A mixed group that all seem to share the same idiom.

### Gold sheet figures

Gold sheet figures are tiny images of humans or human looking figures stamped or scratched into thin gold sheets, often the size of a fingernail or approximately 1 cm<sup>2</sup>. Gold sheet figures have been found on many different locations in Denmark, Sweden and Norway, and they are a purely Scandinavian phenomenon. The first finds date back to the beginning of the

17<sup>th</sup> century but when Elisabeth Munksgaard wrote her article, new finds of gold sheet figures had slowly begun to emerge from a number of different locations. And, during the last twenty years the bulk of gold sheet figures has increased dramatically [Watt 1999a].

Table 1. Scandinavian archaeological chronological periods in Late Iron Age [Lund Hansen et al. 1995:18; Jørgensen, Jørgensen 1997a: 38].

Archaeological period	Absolute dating
Early Germanic Iron Age/ Migration Period	Roughly A.D. 400- 520/40
Late Germanic Iron Age/ Merovingian Period	A.D. 520/40-800
Viking Age	A.D. 800-1050

From the famous site Sorte Muld on the island of Bornholm in the Baltic Sea roughly 2400 gold sheet figures have so far been unearthed and more may be added to this number every year [Watt 2001] (Fig. 1). Together with the finds from two other important Danish sites, Toftegård on Seeland and Lundeberg on Funen, the Danish finds now comprise roughly 2600 gold sheet figures [Thomsen 1993; Tornbjerg 1997]. New finds have also appeared in Sweden [Lundqvist 1996; Watt 1999b]. Not quite in the same numbers as on Sorte Muld, but nevertheless they are important leads in the overall picture of the distribution, importance and use of gold sheet figures in Late Iron Age Scandinavia.

An intriguing aspect of the gold sheet figure is that we do not know what this artefact was used for. Over the years many different possibilities has been suggested, as a means of payment, as ornaments, as votive offerings, but none of these solutions seem to be able to explain the content of the images [further references see Böhner 1995; Watt 2001]. No written sources reveal how gold sheet figures were handed or regarded, and the location and condition of the finds only tell us where, but almost nothing about how and why.

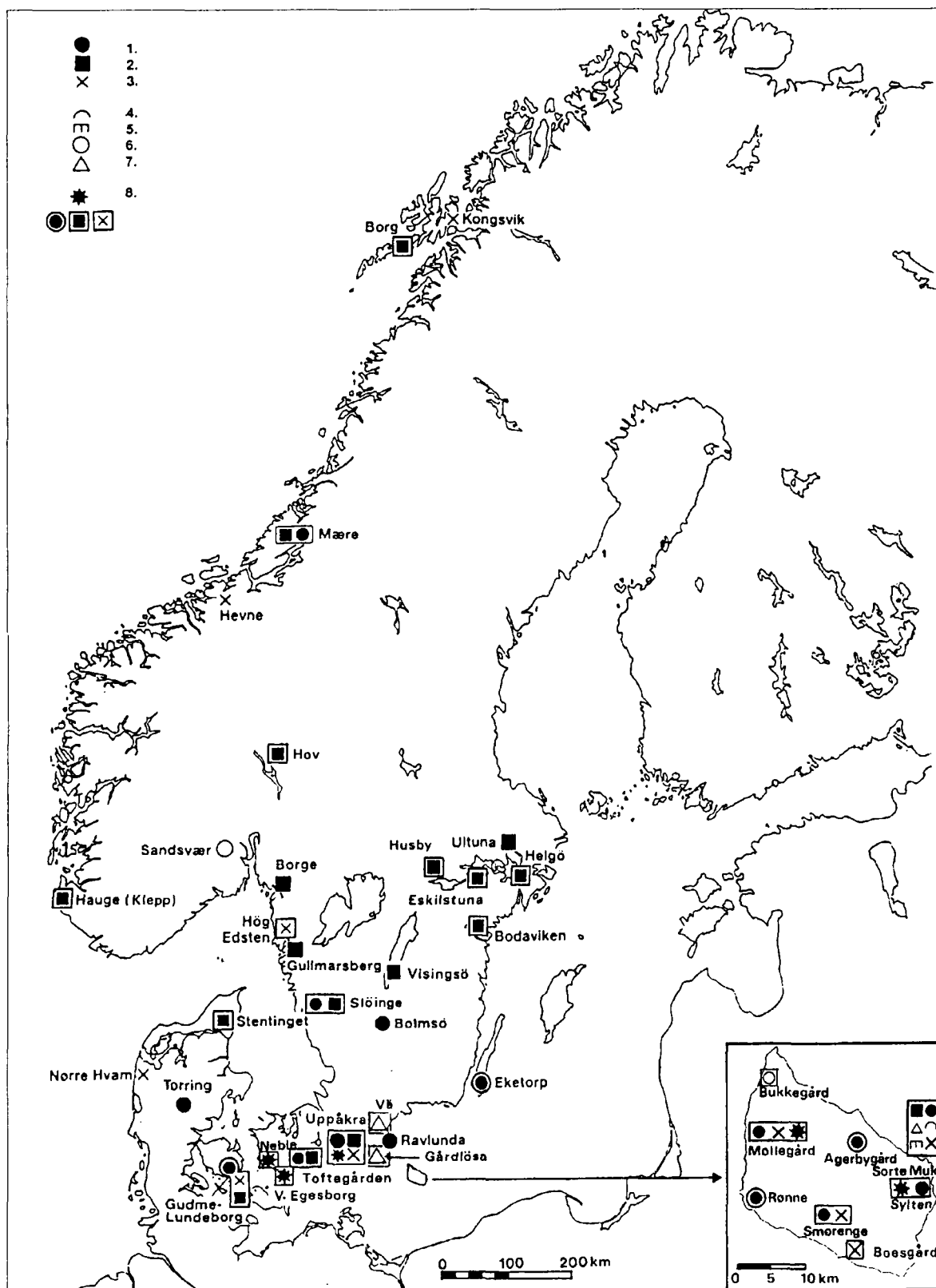


Fig. 1. Distribution of Scandinavian gold sheet figures. After Watt 1999b. 1 – Stamped single figures; 2 – Stamped double figures; 3 – Individually cut or engraved figures; 4 – Stamped animal figures; 5 – Individually cut animal figures; 6 – Uncertain figure type; 7 – Stamped bronze figures; 8 – Stamp for gold sheet figures. Framed symbols indicate settlement context. The map covers finds until 2001.

Gold sheet figures are images of no obvious practical use: tiny, fragile and different from the rest of the material culture observed in this period. The starting point for an understanding about their function and use must be the images themselves. From this perspective costume studies plays an important part and comprise an until now unexploited counterbalance to the all too often fragmented and destroyed textile remains.

### Sex and dress

Working with iconography it is obvious that there are many pitfalls both in the registration and interpretation of the material. In any type of costume study based on comparison with archaeological textiles, it is important to assure chronological and contextual comparability. Aspects necessary to clarify beforehand are, for instance, if the depiction displays "real" and recognisable costumes, or if it is possible to differentiate between men and women.

The clothed figures depicted on the gold sheets are always shown in full and in spite of the small size it is amazing how many details can be distinguished. It was undoubtedly of greatest importance that the clothing could be recognised, and great effort was put into making the dress realistic. Obviously, it was possible to identify the depicted figure mainly through the dress.

Gold sheet figures can either display one person or two persons opposed to each other. Gold sheet figures with two figures most often portray two very different looking figures and it is an obvious assumption that this difference is related to their sex. To test this belief a test-group was selected and the figures split into separate elements. These elements were then inserted and sorted in a table, as shown in Table 2, and it turned out that some of these elements are mutually exclusive (see Table 2). Compared with archaeologically known sex-determinants, like jewellery and hairstyles, it has been possible to link these characteristics to the sexes. Therefore it can be determined that in the iconography females most often wear a longer and different looking garment than the males. In other words, a sex-identification can in many instances be made purely on the basis of the different costumes depicted on the gold sheets.

Having identified male and female in the pictures it is now possible to make a more thorough analysis of the recorded elements. In the first run the garment elements were named theoretically according to their possible use, and only secondly it turned out that these definitions were in strong accordance with the archaeological textile finds.

In general the gold sheet figures reveal three different elements of outer clothing, cloak, coat and



Fig. 2. Drawing of double figured gold sheet from Slöinge in Sweden. The male to the left is wearing a coat, tunic and trousers. The female to the right is wearing a coat and a dress with train.

jacket, which has a different use in male and female costume.

The female cloak always rests on the shoulders and is open at the front. The male cloak is on the other hand closed on the shoulder, which gives it a characteristic split profile (Fig. 2). If dress pins or fibulae are depicted they most often belong to the closing of the cloak.

The coat looks very much like the cloak but it differs from this by the indication of a sleeve. On few gold sheet figures the lower edge is further decorated with a row of small triangles and it is possible that this represents a fringe (Fig. 3). Both men and women wear the coat and this is the only garment common to both sexes.

The female jacket is defined by having an evident sleeve and a straight lower edge (Fig. 4). The same applies to the male jacket but this is characterised by a diagonally slanting front, which in most cases is decorated with wide bands (Fig. 5). This garment is also known as a caftan jacket and it is exclusively worn by men.

Garments worn underneath the outdoor clothes are for the female a dress or skirt and blouse, and for the male tunic and trousers.

Unfortunately, the upper part of the female dress is in most cases hidden by the outer garment and therefore a more thorough description is not possible. What is left to see shows that the dress generally consists of one layer and has a long sleeve. Dress and skirt always reach the ankles or even cover the foot and some-

Table 2. Table showing an analysis of single garment elements and other characteristics recorded on the double and single gold sheet figures from Slöinge in Sweden (Fig. 1). The marked areas show elements that are only represented in one group. Group 1 represent females and group 2 males.

No.	Figure standing to the	Cloak	Cape	Long dress	Short tunic	Long skirt	Blouse	Belt	Train	Trousers	Long legs	Short legs	No hair	Short ponytail	Long ponytail	Hair knot	Cap or hairnet	Fibula	Arm ring	Ankle ring
Group 1	1	Right		X	X				X			X				X			X	
	2	Right	X	X								X	X					X		
	3	Right	X	X								X				X		X		
	4	Right	?	X								?					X			
	5	Right				X	X	X				X					X	X	X	
	6	Left	X	X					X			X		X					X	X
	7	Left	X			X	X		X			X	X							
	8	Left	X	X					X			X		X				X	X	
	9	Left	X			X		X	X			X					X	X		
	10	Left	?	X								X		X						
	11	Right	X	X					X			X				X		X	X	
	12	Right	X	X					X			X		X					X	
	13	Left		X								X	X							
	14	Right	X	X								X	X							
	15	Single figure	X	X								X	X							
	16	Single figure	X	X								X							X	
Group 2	1	Left		X	X				X					X					X	
	2	Left			X						X			X						
	3	Left			X						X									
	4	Left			?						?			X						
	5	Left			X				X			X							X	X
	6	Right			X				X					X					X	
	7	Right			X				X			X							X	X
	8	Right			X				X					X						
	9	Right			X				X			X							X	X
	10	Right			?						?	X								
	11	Right			X						X				X					
	12	Left			X		X	X		X				X						
	13	Right			X						X	X								
	14	Left			X			?			X	X								
	17	Single figure			X			X			X			X						
18	Single figure			X			?			X			X							
19	Single figure			X						X		?								
20	Single figure			?		X				?			X							
21	Single figure			?							?		X							

times end in a train. The blouse is closed at the front and has a long sleeve.

The male counterpart consists basically of tunic and trousers. The tunic is closed in the front and can have both long and short sleeves. Contrary to the female dress, it never exceeds the knees but the basic design is very much the same. The trousers are the most varied group and they may have wide or narrow legs. Most often they are worn underneath the tunic but some of the men may also have bare legs.

From this it can be deduced that the female costume in most cases is combined of two layers of garments. An outer clothing like a cloak, coat or jacket and underneath this either a dress or skirt and blouse. The male costume is generally less complex and consists most often of only one layer. The standard is tunic and trousers.

Apart from the obviously clothed figures a quite large proportion of the male figures are depicted more or less naked. As an example they can be stripped to the waist and only be wearing trousers and/or maybe a belt. Others may have no indication of a garment whatsoever, but that doesn't necessary mean that they should be regarded as naked. The non-dressed state occurs most often on single image gold sheets. It is extremely rare that identifiable females are naked [Watt 2001: 221].

### Iconography and archaeology

Most garment elements recorded on the gold sheet figures are also known archaeologically. Although it is not possible to give a fully detailed comparison within this paper a few points illustrating the constructive interaction between image and reality will be highlighted.

From the period covering the gold sheet finds, 5<sup>th</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> century A.D., knowledge about textile techniques and technology from the archaeological finds is well-established [Bender Jørgensen 1986, 1992]. In many cases it is possible to recognise patterns in the garments that resemble specific textile textures and to pinpoint changes in the iconographic garments that correspond to chronologically determined differences in the archaeological textile record [Mannering 1999]. A fact which underlines the realism in the pictures.

Tunic and trousers are well known elements in the archaeological textile record and it is no surprise that they dominate the male costume in the iconography. From the Scandinavian Roman Iron Age, the period preceding Late Iron Age, we can count quite a few more or less complete finds of tunics and trousers [Schlabow 1976] and some of the most prominent early Germanic textile finds, for instance from Enebø-Eide in Norway and Högom in Sweden, seem to



Fig. 3. Drawing of double figured gold sheet from Helgö in Sweden. The male to the left is wearing tunic and trousers. The female to the right is wearing a jacket and a dress with train.

continue this costume tradition [Magnus 1982; Bender Jørgensen 1991; Nockert 1991]. Probably these items of clothing were also an important part of male attire in the following periods, although specific information on the finds is scarce [Hägg 1984, 1986, 1991; Elsner 1989].

Based on information concerning fibulas and jewellery in the grave finds, it is well known that female dress changed during the period covered by the gold sheets. In the Roman as well as the early Germanic Iron Age, the Scandinavian peplos-like dress was used [Bennet 1987; Demant 1996]. This dress is characterised by a pair of fibulas positioned on the shoulders. In the following period the fibulas move downward to the chest and this is a characteristic of the late Germanic and Viking Age strapped dress [Hägg 1974, Jørgensen, Jørgensen 1997:59, Mannering 1997]. Both of these dress-types are thought to be worn over a slip/shift, i.e. a dress in two layers.

On the gold sheets, unfortunately, the outer garment covers the upper part of the female figures and therefore a firm identification of the dress depicted is not possible. The fact that only extremely few females are definitely depicted in a dress with two layers could on the other hand indicate the presence of a third unheeded variant: that the female only are wearing a slip or a similar dress that functions without dress fasteners.

Another important contribution to our present knowledge about Scandinavian Late Iron Age dress that the iconography may yield is information on the different in outer garments. Outer garments are docu-





Fig. 4. Drawing of double figured gold sheet from Hauge in Norway. The male to the left is wearing a cloak and a tunic. The female to the right is wearing a cloak and a dress.

mented in the archaeological textile finds in all periods [see for instance Hald 1980] but in the grave finds details of manufacture are often scarce. Therefore the documented difference in the different types of outer garments, such as cloaks, coats and jackets are important. Apart from the cloak, which is the only garment recorded that so far has not been confirmed archaeologically, it can be stated that the gold sheet figures reveal a detailed knowledge about contemporary costume. For instance, the difference in how males and females wear the cloak is also well attested by grave finds and this accuracy makes the gold sheets a useful source in the investigation of the late Iron Age costume.

#### Male and female models

If we subtract fragmented and indistinct designs the Scandinavian gold sheet figures presently amount to roughly 600 different pictures that can be used in a dress analysis. Considering the number of pictures is so large, it is striking that it is possible to divide them into a very few homogeneous groups.

In short, males are either depicted in a set of garments consisting of 1) tunic and trousers and some times a cloak, 2) caftan jacket, or 3) naked, partly naked or in close fitting clothes with or without a belt. Not all dress types are equally represented and the male wearing tunic and trousers is definitely the most common.

For the females it is a different situation as the main part of the images belong to one type: the dress/cloak or skirt/blouse/cloak combination. It is extremely rare that recognisable females are depicted naked or without any indication of dress (see Table 3).

From the above it is evident that there is an obvious difference in the number of male and female costume combinations depicted on the gold sheets. Or expressed differently: in the number of male and female models used in the images.

As mentioned earlier the caftan-dressed man is never depicted together with women, and this probably indicates that this type of garment is connected with a sphere separated from female presence. In some cases these caftan-clad figures are carrying a stick/staff, interpreted as a sceptre, which could indicate a connection with supreme authority, but this attribute also occurs in connection with the males wearing tunic and trousers [Watt 2001: 225f; Böhner 1995: 731ff]. The caftan is also depicted on other artefacts as, for instance, stamped metal foil and helmet foil and in this context the garment is definitely connect-



Fig. 5. Drawing of single figured gold sheet from Sorte Muld in Denmark. The male is wearing a caftan jacket.

ed with warriors. Therefore it possible to see the caftan costume as a representative of an exclusive, male dominated and maybe international environment: the model of warriors or even kings.

On the other hand the men wearing tunic and trousers probably represent a far more common model and the fact that this male type can be depicted together with women definitely gives the males a far

Table 3. Possible garment combinations recorded on single and double-pictured gold sheets.

	Double-pictures	Single-pictures	Single-pictures
	Male/female or two asexual/ androgynous figures	Male or asexual figures	Female
Tunic and trousers	X	X	
Caftan		X	
Naked or partly dressed	(X)*	X	(X)
Dress (skirt/blouse) and cloak	X		X

\* There are a few double gold sheet figures from Lundeborg on Funen in Denmark where male and female are depicted in close fitting or no costume. These are definitely an exception.

more peaceful image. A possible match for this model could be the farmer or civilian warrior.

The females do on the other hand only display one model: a well-dressed woman with many layers of costume, neat hair and some times prestigious jewellery. It is not difficult to connect this model to the ideal housewife or lady, which is so often portrayed in the sagas [Göransson 1999].

It is much more difficult to interpret the half-naked or completely naked figures, males and females, displayed on the gold sheets. Are they really naked, representing the poorest part of the population as workmen and slaves? Or are they to be seen as the archetype of a male and female, purified from worldly goods? One possibility is that this type of model reflects a specific action or condition, as not even in the Scandinavian Iron Age was it normal to be naked.

None of the interpretations of the gold sheets that have been suggested over the centuries have turned out to be applicable to all images. And maybe we are wrong to seek a unitary solution. Dress analysis has revealed that the gold sheet figures primarily depict humans belonging to the elite. This is emphasised both by the dress and by the jewellery and other artefacts which sometimes accompany the figures. As long as the context in which the gold sheets were used is not clear, one cannot exclude the possibility that the gold sheet figures could be mythological figures/persons, but from dress analysis it can be concluded that the figures are dressed in correct contemporary costumes.

The above suggestions are at the moment the most plausible suggestions for an interpretation and understanding of the gold sheet figures seen from a textile and costume perspective. It is highly likely that when the many other depictions that are recorded from the Scandinavian Iron Age are incorporated in this work, information on context, use and intention will proba-

bly bring forward new facts that may support or modify our present knowledge.

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