

Roman Reflections and Cultural Changes in the Barbarian North: from Roman Medallions to Germanic Bracteates

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The barbarian periphery of the Roman world was strongly affected by the Empire's symbols of power and authority. Germanic reflections of Roman power have been a focus of consideration for many researchers,¹ and the problem of the transition from the imitation of Roman art to the development of native Germanic styles has probably been one of the most beneficial themes of research.² Though the main trends in the development of Germanic art are no longer points of discussion, some particular questions about the social context of cultural changes remain relevant.

The problem might be formulated as the correlation between the social context of Roman medallions, as male attributes in Germanic societies, and later Germanic bracteates, which became female attributes. The transition from medallions to bracteates reflects a change in the artistic conception of Germanic jewellery, and in most cases has been explained in terms of the adoption of Roman art by barbarian society.³

To my mind, however, it might also be beneficial to stress the social aspect of the cultural changes, and correlate the development of the new motifs with the transformation of both the Roman and Germanic worlds. In Roman Iron Age Germanic burials and hoards numerous Roman coins and medallions are found, which were probably given a deep symbolic meaning. Around the year 400 A.D., a considerable change in the Germanic perception of power took place. During the Migration Age, the Roman attributes were debased and replaced by the bracteates with native Germanic symbols, which gradually became simple female jewellery, without any significant social context.⁴ This substitution was provoked by the growth of the wealth of Germanic nobility, and the decline of the Roman political system.

¹ Some preliminary conclusions and a summary were presented at a symposium on the role of Roman gold in the development of the early Germanic kingdoms, in Stockholm in November 1997.

² See Gaimster M. *Vendel period bracteates on Gotland: On the Significance of Germanic Art* (Lund, 1998).

³ This approach was introduced by Karl Hauck in late 1950's and was widely accepted by other researchers.

⁴ This statement might be disputed by some researchers. To my mind, the most illustrative example may be Vendel Age E-bracteates.