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The shifting ecospheres of guldgubbar

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Skärvor ur det förflutna

En vänbok till Mats Roslund

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Free or framed?

The shifting ecospheres of *guldgubbar*

ING-MARIE BACK DANIELSSON

This paper explores guldgubbar*, small gold foil figures from Vendel Period Scandinavia (c. 550–800 CE), through a new materialist lens, moving beyond representational interpretations rooted in Cartesian thought, that usually frames images to be in stasis. Instead of seeking a singular meaning, the study focuses on the figures' materiality, affective qualities, and ontological openness. Drawing on Karen Barad's agential realism,* guldgubbar *are approached as relational participants within entangled ecologies of matter and meaning. Agency and affect are treated not as fixed attributes, but as effects of intra-actions between bodies, materials, environments and material-discursive elements. A folded gold foil figure from Tørring, Denmark, is one example that demonstrates how these objects invite multisensory engagement, transformation, and play, fostering what Hustak and Myers term "affective ecologies." The paper argues that the figures' small scale, malleability, and aesthetic diversity enabled ongoing reconfigurations and social entanglements. Rather than static images,* guldgubbar *are seen as dynamic agents in the making of past worlds.*

Introduction

This paper discusses *guldgubbar*, tiny humanoid figures of great variety made from thin gold foil sheets. They are only found in Scandinavia, and generally dated to the Vendel Period (550–800 CE). While they have been analysed and discussed for at least three centuries, and by different academic disciplines, the interpretations of them are still very limited. They are commonly studied from a representationalist mode of understanding. This article seeks to approach and understand the figures from a different perspective, where the material properties of the metal gold is considered. Equally, they are seen as emerging in processes of making and engagement. The latter statement is connected to a new materialist understanding of agency and affect. Agency is in this case seen as the process of cause and effect in an enactment, thus not an attribute of something or someone. This means that intentionality is not seen as located in the human subject, as is the case with Gell's (1998) idea on secondary agency, that emanates from humans. Rather, agency and affect are viewed as relational effects of enactments and encounters. Affect is a concept that is particularly apt for discussions of gold foil figures, due to their many affective qualities in the form of size, the malleability and shininess of the metal gold, their figural motifs that occasionally invited manipulations of the figures' bodies or body parts, etc. (e.g. Back Danielsson 2007; 2013; 2020).

Agency and ecospheres in a new materialist understanding

I have found that Karen Barad's concepts of intra-action, apparatuses, and phenomena are particularly insightful for understanding the multiplicity and unfolding nature of *guldgubbar* or gold foil figures. In her influential works (2003; 2007), Barad explores in depth how matter comes to matter in what can be described as agential realism. She introduces the concept of intra-action and articulates an agential realist ontology; an account focused on the performative emergence of material bodies (Barad 2003, p. 814). This theoretical framework is especially relevant to archaeologists and other scholars concerned with material culture. According to Barad, bodies, broadly defined, are produced through apparatuses, which simultaneously bring about phenomena. These apparatuses and the resulting phenomena are causally related through agential intra-actions. Barad's use of intra-action, rather than interaction, emphasizes that entities do not pre-exist their relationships. Instead, practices occur *within* entangled phenomena, not between distinct, pre-given entities. These practices are material-discursive, involving not only physical objects but also bodies, discourses, and other non-human materialities (Barad 2003, p. 814). Categories emerge through intra-actions and are themselves products of earlier entanglements. From this perspective, the world is in a continual state of becoming. Researchers, therefore, are not external observers but are themselves entangled participants in the world's differential becoming (Barad 2003, p. 829). From this standpoint, attempting to separate epistemology from ontology becomes futile. Such a separation presupposes inherent distinctions "between human and nonhuman,







subject and object, mind and body, matter and discourse" (Barad 2003, p. 829). Bearing this new materialist view of agency in mind, the focus in this paper is on the relational effects of enactments and encounters, here pertaining to the intra-action between *guldgubbar* and other entities, whether living or inanimate. Commonly, ecospheres denote the interaction between living and non-living components. Here, obviously, ecospheres refer to the *intra*-action between living and non-living bodies.

Detailing *guldgubbar*

Guldgubbar, small human-like figures, have a length of *c.* 1,0–2,5cm, and weigh less than one gram, commonly *c.* 0.1–0.15gram, and are made from thin, hammered gold foil (Gullman 2004). These thin gold foil figures may show human-like single figures (figs. 1–2), couples (fig. 3), and at times also animals. A few may further be highly stylized. The majority of the figures is stamped with the use of patrices of bronze, whereas others may be cut-out of a very thin gold foil, or have figures carved onto them (Lamm 2004, p. 109). Depictions of gold foil figures are known in literature from the 18th century (e.g. Sperling 1700; Sjöborg 1791). Only through archaeological excavations in the 20th century were the circumstances and contexts in which gold foil figures were recovered recorded in more detail. The gold foil figures are frequently, though not exclusively, discovered in ceremonial halls located at so-called central places, sites that often served multiple functions (e.g. Watt 2002, p. 81; Ahlström et al. 2024). Examples include, for instance, Helgö, Slöinge, Ströja, Uppåkra, and Svintuna in Sweden, as well as Borg and Hov in Norway. Their presence at such significant locations, combined with the observation that some figures from different sites are remarkably similar or even identical, has led to the interpretation that they may signify aristocratic networks. However, these figures are not confined to elite or ceremonial contexts. They have also been uncovered in hoards (such as Nørre Hvam in Denmark and Hög Edsten in Sweden), in a ring-fort or enclosure (Eketorp, Sweden), and even within the fill of a boat burial (Ulltuna, Sweden). Some scholars have proposed that the figures functioned as a kind of "temple coin," distributed in connection with cultic practices (Watt 1991, p. 99; see also Hauck 1994, p. 302; Lamm 2004). Among these, the gold foil couples, depicting two figures facing one another, are commonly interpreted as symbols of a fertility cult, possibly representing a *hieros gamos* or sacred marriage between the Norse god Freyr and the giantess

Fig. 1. (top) Single gold foil figure from Smørenge, Bornholm. Photo: René Laursen.

Fig. 2. (middle) The two gold foil figures found in a grave in Bolmsö, Håringe parish, Småland. SHM 14535, grave 10. Photo: Gunnel Jansson, SHM.

Fig. 3. (bottom) Gold foil couple from Krokek, Östergötland, Sweden. From building complex, SHM 21517. Photo: Gunnel Jansson, SHM.

Gerd (Steinsland 1991; cf. Sundqvist 2002; Lamm 2004). Alternatively, they have been seen as visual expressions of dynastic marriages (Simek 2002, p. 475; see also Ratke & Simek 2006). Despite these varied interpretations, they all rely on textual sources composed centuries after the production of the figures themselves, a point that has been critiqued (see e.g. Back Danielsson 2007). Further, these interpretations typically seek to uncover the 'true' or original function of the figures (e.g. Lamm 2004; Mannering 2006, p. 37; Ratke 2009; Tangen 2010), and many express the notion that the symbolic system behind the figures remains unsolved. All these interpretations rely on the framework of representationalism, that only has been with us since Descartes writings in the 17th century CE (Bolt 2013). What happens to our understanding of gold foil figures if we leave representationalism and the search for a singular, definitive meaning of *guldgubbar*, and instead try to approach their ontology or ontologies in prehistory? This includes acknowledging the material's heterogeneity, their effects and affects, their ecologies, their changing ecospheres, and their continuous emergence in making and engagement.

Guldgubbar, affect and framing devices

The figures, crafted from gold foil, are both delicate and diminutive, yet they possess a striking visual impact. The inherent luminous qualities of gold tend to draw immediate attention, particularly when affixed, using substances such as honey or fat (Larsson & Lenntorp 2004, pp. 23, 42; Rosengren 2000, p. 12), to monumental posts within large hall structures, such as those found at Uppåkra in Sweden. In such settings, the figures would have functioned as small, glimmering beacons, visible even from a considerable distance. While some of these figures were attached to posts in monumental architecture, others were deposited in post-holes. Their modest size did not preclude various forms of manipulation. Some examples exhibit folding, crumpling, or piercing, with specific body parts marked or altered using sharp instruments (e.g Slöinge, Sweden, Bornholm, Denmark). There are also instances where additional foil components, gold foil strips, were affixed, for example, fine wires wrapped around the necks of certain figures, perhaps to simulate golden necklaces, as seen in finds from Uppåkra (Sweden) and Bornholm (Denmark). Notably, one figure from Uppåkra appears to have been pierced in the abdomen by a golden object. Another, seemingly raging with a sword in hand, from Bornholm, had been torn apart. In addition to modifications in gold, other materials were sometimes incorporated. For instance, a robust bronze plate attached to the reverse side of a figure, combined with a loop, facilitated its use as a pendant (Lamm 2004, p. 57).

The examples above present arguments against the idea that the gold foil figures were mere representations, and that they had one meaning, or only were symbols. They were in fact active participants in different events and they were engaged for a variety of purposes. Clearly their smallness invited intimacy, where the closeness with humans and perhaps non-humans may have invited and stimulated engagement between a variety of bodies, where all elements intra-acted in a possibly vibrant ecosphere. Still, this suggestion does not exclude the possibility that some gold foil figures, in some circumstances, had representational value. Framing is a device that usually keeps an image, for instance, within a representational framework. This is the case since the act of framing usually constrains what an image can be, and can do, and keeps an image in statis, a typical trait of representationalism (Serra & Foster 2018, p. 77). This practice pervades in present day museums for instance, and changes the ontology of *guldgubbar*, making it more fit to speak of their hauntology (Back Danielsson 2020, p. 199). However, it might be suggested that framing devices were at hand also during the Vendel Period. One feature of the figural foils that speaks to this declaration is the fact that a large number of gold foil figures is seemingly framed, sometimes with a beaded border. In an earlier piece I interpreted the framing and the beaded borders of the figural foils of gold as portals (Back Danielsson 1999, p. 13), although arguing that they are not (only) suggestive of real gateways, but importantly allude to metaphysical thresholds. One example of a threshold moment is the joining of two people in a union, be it a dynastic or divine wedding. In such instances, the gold foil figures could have acted as playbills or scripts directing performances of union and consummation. Importantly, seeing the couples in profile, makes you, the viewer, a witness to this ceremony, an active participant in an intimate, spontaneously emerged and living ecosphere.

The majority of the gold foil couples is framed, whereas single figures may be both framed and without clear borders, or indeed carved directly onto a thin gold foil sheet, or cut out of the sheet, as previously mentioned. Such figures, from e.g. Bornholm and Uppåkra, may on occasion have had additions or props in the form of necklaces or other bodily affective acts performed on them, or even pricking and marking out vital organs, as mentioned above. Frameless figures, more open-ended in character, might have invited to play and improvisation to a greater extent than framed dittos. Framed figures, including couples, may though have experienced other treatments, such as being folded or crumpled up, where it is obvious that the material properties of the metal gold were pivotal for these affective practices. I will now present a case study where a single gold foil figure has experienced a different treatment. It concerns the gold foil figure from Tørring, Jutland, in Denmark, found in a bog.

The gold foil figure from Tørring, Jutland, Denmark

The gold foil figure from Tørring had been reshaped into a cylindrical form and strung alongside 'ordinary' beads to form part of a necklace (fig. 4). This necklace,

accompanied by a small bronze spiral, was discovered during peat extraction in a bog near Tørring, Denmark (Fischer 1974). When the golden cylinder, functioning as a bead, was unfolded, it revealed an image of a female figure clad in a feather-like garment, possibly holding a beaker, adorned with a button-on-bow brooch, and, fittingly, wearing a necklace with beads herself (Fischer 1974, p. 28). This transformation, folding an image into an object, hints at the creation of layered, interwoven worlds. Through reshaping, the figure acquires new affordances and relational possibilities (see Gibson 1979). The flat depiction becomes a three-dimensional bead, capable of being worn. Interestingly, the figure portrayed on the foil wears a necklace that could conceivably contain similar gold foil 'beads', suggesting a potentially infinite recursion of images and objects – a world within a world. The figure, in this sense, seems to invite interaction, imagination, and the creation of multidimensional and fractal-like relationships.

Such a case suggests that gold foil figures may have been endowed with a variety of capacities, enabling them to function and become many things at once. They operated both as standalone objects and as components, possessing a combinatory potential that allowed for their reconfiguration into new assemblages (e.g. Jones et al. 2016). This points to their open-ended nature and their capacity for continual transformation.

Conclusions – *guldgubbar's* shimmering ecospheres

In this paper, I have tried to reframe the possible stories of *guldgubbar*, or their ontologies, by moving away from representationalist thoughts, that have been argued to be present from the introduction of Cartesian philosophy in the 17th century. I have done this through approaching the figures from a new materialist understanding, specifically Barad's agential realism, where I have emphasised that agency can be seen as the process of cause and effect in an enactment, thus not an attribute of something or someone. Equally, I have paid close attention to the figures affective qualities, and stressed that agency and affect are the results of relational effects of enactments and encounters. The figures' typically humanoid forms and diminutive size also encouraged close, prolonged scrutiny – often requiring sustained looking to discern specific features, and sometimes revealing little or nothing in return. These embodied engagements extended the duration of encounters with the figures, potentially deepening or reshaping different kinds of memories and associations. Such prolonged interactions might have given rise to what Hustak and Myers (2012, pp. 77f) describe as affective ecologies, encompassing elements of play, improvisation, and pleasure (see also Deleuze & Guattari 1988, p. 12, on the symbiotic becoming of the wasp and the orchid). This sense of playfulness may also have been encouraged by the intrinsic material properties of gold. Gold is extraordinarily ductile, one of the most malleable metals known. A single gram can be drawn out into a thread stretching up to 2,000 meters (Jørgensen & Petersen 1998, p. 29). Such properties have likely fascinated people throughout history, making the figures particularly easy to manipulate; fold, unfold, curl into beads, and reshape. It is also important to note that the perception of these gold foil figures changes with the viewer's distance. From afar, they may appear merely as small, glimmering objects. But up close, intricate details may emerge, transforming the object once again and revealing a new visual and sensory experience. Close encounters with these tiny objects, within intimate ecospheres, also turn you into a giant. To sum up, *guldgubbars'* affective qualities, I argue, were decisive for the many ways in which they were engaged, and they should rightly be seen as possible instigators of, and contributors to, what came to unravel in their ecospheres. These figures – ranging from aesthetically refined and intricately detailed to crude, grotesque, adorned, worn, damaged, folded, unfolded, remelted, or pierced – bear witness to a multitude of practices and events in which they were not merely passive objects but active participants. Their material transformations suggest a desire, or at least an affordance, to enter into diverse social relationships with humans, bodies, places, and objects.



Fig. 4. The necklace (left) equipped with the gold foil figure that worked as a bead, shaped as it was in a cylinder form. The unfolded gold foil figure (right) from Tørring, once working as a bead. The necklace was deposited in a bog in Tørring, Jutland, Denmark. Sources: Fischer 1974.

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