Anthropomorphic and Zoomorphic Miniature Figures in Eurasia, Africa and Meso-America

Morphology, materiality, technology, function and context

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Go Figure! Creating Intertwined Worlds in the Scandinavian Late Iron Age (AD 550–1050)

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Abstract
This paper discusses Scandinavian gold foil figures from the early part of the Late Iron Age (AD 550–1050). The author presents two major points of interest that have been neglected in previous research. The first highlights how the manipulations the figures have undergone must be taken into consideration, which is accomplished with the help of theatre theory, semiotics and anthropology. The second places an emphasis on how the context from which the figures have been retrieved must be analysed. Consequently, from the example of a ceremonial building at Uppåkra, Sweden, it is contended that the figures were made by artisans smiths that, apart from expertly making the figures, also acted as ritual specialists when the structure was built or inaugurated. As such, they were responsible for depositing specific figures in particular, designated and pivotal places that needed protection or other ritual treatment. The gold foil figures further highlight the intertwinement between subject and object, human and nonhuman, as well as between the divine and the mundane. Therefore they contribute significantly to discussions on materiality.

Key-words: Gold foil figures; miniaturization; Scandinavia; Iron Age; ritual specialists; smiths; Uppåkra; materiality.

Introduction
Thin stamped or cut-out miniature gold foil figures known only from Scandinavia are mainly attributed to the Vendel Period (AD 550–800) although their chronological span might begin in the Migration Period (AD 400–550) and end in the Viking Age (AD 800–1050) (Lamm 2004, 130). Commonly, efforts are made by archaeologists to sex the figures as well as to attribute them with divine identities that are found in later medieval written sources (e.g., Hauck 1993, 1994; Watt 2001). Instead, the present paper focuses on the agency of the objects, their unavoidable connection to magic, who made them and deposited them and also the manipulations the figures sometimes have undergone. Some have been pierced (e.g., Lamm 2004, 130), crumpled up (e.g., Watt 1992), dressed up with necklaces (e.g., Back Danielsson 1999; Watt 2004) or have received other bodily treatments (e.g., Watt 1992).

Perhaps easier than other material culture in human-like form, gold foil figures benefit from being discussed in terms of materiality. By materiality I refer to the ongoing discussions within archaeology in recent years on the relational aspects between people and things that has been described as co-presence (Meskell 2006), bundling (Keane 2003) or things as co-producers of art and styles (Latour 1991). I would go further and argue that not only the figures benefit from such a discussion but the archaeological discipline as well (cf. Meskell 2006, 4–7). A focal point, argues Meskell (2006, 4–5), with support from Latour (2000, 2004), is for archaeology to recognize the convergence in past societies of categorizations such as object and society, sociologies and cosmologies as well as the human and nonhuman. These categorizations and taxonomies are ultimately the result of Enlightenment thinking (Meskell 2006, 5).

In the specific case of gold foil figures I argue that it is also necessary to acknowledge the convergence of technological knowledge with that of ritual knowledge (cf. Goldhahn and Oestigaard 2007, 6). Another point of importance is that despite the fact that at times gold foil figures have been recovered from many similar places in Scandinavia, they cannot be interpreted along a single universal scheme. Simply put, one size does not fit all.

In this paper I start by showing how these miniature and manipulated figures benefit from being discussed as agents or subjects rather than objects. This conclusion is reached by applying thoughts on materiality from anthropology, theatre studies, and semiotics. I continue by discussing smiths as ritual specialists and their relation to magic. Finally I investigate the possible meanings of a few gold foil figures that were placed within a ceremonial building at Uppåkra, Sweden. The present study provides suggestions on how the ritual specialist as well as the gold foil figures acted to intertwine prehistoric human and divine worlds and arenas.

An overview of gold foil figures
Gold foil figures are a category of objects that has been known for hundreds of years. The figures only are known from Denmark, Sweden and Norway, and are generally dated
to the Vendel Period (AD 550–800). They are tiny and have a length of c. 1–2.5cm, and weigh less than one gram, commonly c. 0.1–0.15gr (Gullman 2004). These thin gold foils may show human-like single figures, pairs, and at times also animals (Figs. 1–4). A few may be highly stylized (Fig. 5).

Fig. 1: The Uppåkra figure on this gold foil is seen wearing an enlarged brooch under the chin, and the figure also holds a drinking horn in the right hand (Source: Watt 2004, 187, figure 19a).

Fig. 2: This figure has the characteristically rolling-pin-like nose and carries a lance/scepter. From a single die six copies of this figure were made, and they were all retrieved within the Uppåkra building. Figures with lances/scepters have been interpreted as the Asir god Thor (Source: Watt 2004, 177 figure 9).

Fig. 3: An Uppåkra figure with caftan clothes, dressed with an added golden collar. The figure carries a short pointed sword as well. Other figures – not only of gold foil – are known to have been dressed in golden collars, and such collars also adorned human beings. (Source: Watt 2004, 172 figure 3a).

Fig. 4: A gold foil couple from Uppåkra. Couples are not common at Uppåkra, but are instead more prominent at other locations such as at Helgö, Slöinge and Borg. The couples have been interpreted as representing a sacred wedding (Source: Watt 2004, 196 figure 28c).
The majority of the figures are stamped with the use of bronze patrices whereas others may be cut-out of a very thin gold foil (Lamm 2004:109). 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 most frequent place of recovery for the figures has been in connection to special buildings or workshops (e.g., Helgö, Slöinge, Borg, Uppåkra, Svintuna, Vä, Husby; see Fig. 6). They have also been recovered in a bog (Torring), within burials (Bolmsö, Visingsö, Ulltuna) and in or as hoards (e.g., Hög Edsten, Nørre Hvam) (Andréasson 1995; Back Danielsson 2007, 194–195).

More than 2,800 gold foil figures have been recovered on the island of Bornholm, Denmark (Lamm 2004, 125), whereas other places have harboured anything from a few to some hundred figures (Fig. 2). At Uppåkra, which will be discussed here, between the years 1997 and 2004, more than 120 figure foils and four complete patrices were recovered (Watt 2004), but today the total number exceeds 200. The majority of these were retrieved in what has been characterized as a special ceremonial building.

A prevailing interpretation of the gold foil figures is that they represent gods and heroes, and that the figures worked as temple coins were a way of paying for ritual services (e.g., Hauck 1994, 302; Watt 1992, 2004, 216). These proposals are refuted in the case of the Uppåkra figures for a number of reasons, including their depositional circumstances (cf. Fabech 1998, 154).

Miniature, manipulation, and performing objects

The gold foil figures are indeed miniscule in size and may be referred to as miniatures. A miniature is something copied or represented in a smaller size from something larger (Johansen 1997, 58). We may recognize a model railway as being a miniature of a real railway. The purpose of models is to be accurate in measurement, thus simply to represent material culture in a smaller size. Bailey argues that miniatures are different from models, since they ‘do not seek accuracy in representation’ (2005, 29), that is, the miniature is not represented in terms of scale.

Miniaturization enables people to think and create meaning, which may be referred to as metaphorical thinking (Johansen 1997). The main techniques for metaphorical thinking are, according to Johansen, stylization and miniaturization (1997, 49-63). Miniaturization makes manipulations possible and necessary, and these may be described in terms of simplification and/or exaggeration (Johansen 1997, 57) or in terms of abstraction and compression (Bailey 2005, 32). I maintain that a fundamental difference between models and miniatures is that models are not polysemous, and they do not invite disparate *significata*. They may nonetheless, in the same way as miniatures, evoke emotions within the handler or viewer, such as wonder, awe and/or empowerment (Bailey 2005, 29, 33). Models as well as miniatures contribute to the intelligibility of the world, since knowing the whole before
the parts of the whole is gratifying for the intelligence (Rosenblum 2001, 21), and miniature figures are further ways of exploring and creating ourselves through a different site of signification (Tillis 2000, 175). Through this site of signification an array of issues and emotions may be more effectively illuminated in comparison to using performing, living beings (Skitparc 2000, 125).

Theatre studies also suggest ways in which figures (as well as puppets and masks) can be apprehended. Proschan (1983, 4) has introduced the concept of **performing objects**. These are ‘material images of humans, animals, or spirits that are created, displayed or manipulated in narrative or dramatic performance’ (Proschan 1983, 4). I argue in this paper that the gold foil figures, apart from being analysed as miniatures, benefit from being discussed as performing objects. However, the term object is rather misleading since an object can become an actor or subject during performances; and an actor, a person, can even be transformed into an object (Benjamin 1979; Veltrusky 1964). Through their engagement the boundary between living and immobile dead matter is obliterated (Jakobson 1975, 8). In semiotic terms performing objects act as symbols, as signs of signs and more seldom as signs of objects, with the crucial consequence that they often are abbreviated (Bogatyrev 1976, 33). Abbreviation commonly holds that certain marks or elements are only considered necessary in a specific context (Proschan 1983, 14), and this abbreviation invites disparate **significata** which opens them up to interpretational plurality (Tonkin 1979, 245). With such techniques, paradox and power is manifested and exerted, inviting and generating a possible array of mixed and enhanced feelings. To be able to relate to such **significata** is to be powerful (Tonkin 1979, 245).

Then what manipulations and/or abbreviations have the gold foil figures undergone? Two kinds of manipulations may be noted. The first consists of incorporated manipulations made at the same time as the figure itself, that is, the exaggeration or abbreviation is part of the patrix used to make the foil figure. The second kind of manipulation is made after the figure is stamped, or occasionally cut out of a foil. These include dressing the figures with necklaces (Fig. 3) or belts, piercing the figures, adding possible phallic features (Fig. 5), bending the lower part/legs of the figures possibly symbolizing a sitting posture (Fig. 5) and the like.

**Incorporated manipulations**

If we look at the head of the stamped figures, most of them have enlarged eyes and noses (Figs. 1–4). Furthermore, hands may be exaggerated because their position was important, as in gestures or as in placing emphasis on hands holding things (Fig. 1).

The importance of gestures in non-literate or oral societies has been noted by many researchers (e.g., Ratte and Simek 2006; Watt 1992, 2004). In the case of Uppåkra, a few gestures are similar to those shown on Christian figures on a variety of objects from continental Europe (Watt 2004, 204–209). For instance, some gestures are interpreted in connection to adoration or divine epiphany, and a few as representing the ‘seer’s thumb’, an important sign within many mythologies, such as in Celtic, Norse as well as Christian religions (Watt 2004, 204–8, figs. 33–34). The seer’s thumb is found in religions/mythologies connected to prophesies and thus has shamanic connotations. However, a large number of gestures of the gold foil figures (and also the absence of gestures) do not have any counterparts outside Scandinavia. This implies that the gold foil figures must be interpreted within their Scandinavian context.

Also, the jewellery of the figures, in the form of arm-rings, brooches (such as disc-on-bow brooches) and necklaces are as well commonly enlarged (Fig. 1), emphasizing their importance. Although the jewellery carried significant details in stories or ceremonies (e.g., Magnus 2001), it must also be pointed out that this very jewellery in fact was manufactured by the artisans that also were responsible for giving birth to the gold foil figures. Enlarging these items may thus also mean enlarging the meaning of the artisan.

At the time in question, gold is perceived to be the metal of gods to the extent that the words golden and godly/divine are used interchangeably (Jørgensen and Yang Petersen 1998, 82). Gold had a mythological origin during the Iron Age in Scandinavia and thereby also magical powers (Holtsmark 1960). It is thus possible to describe the gold foil figures as divine miniature beings with luminous properties that also attracted a numinous presence (Back Danielsson 2007, 186–188).

The divine miniature beings were dressed up by the artisan either through incorporation of the jewellery already in the patrix, or later through adding, for instance, golden necklaces. The artisan making gold foil figures was also responsible for giving divine numen to certain human beings by producing and equipping them with arm-rings, disc-on-bow brooches and necklaces. Consequently the artisan acted as a medium between the divine and the mundane worlds, furnishing both humans and divine beings with paraphernalia necessary for performing certain ceremonies. What is more, the artisan was also so powerful and in possession of such specific knowledge as to produce and deliver the miniature gods. This is indeed in agreement with the Norse anthropogenic myth in Voluspá, which recounts that gods created smiths or artisan that in turn made **manlikon**, human or human-like beings in the shape of statues or something similar (Steinsland 1983, 85). This accentuates the special position and role the artisan held at the time in question.

The fact that necklaces with perceived divinatory powers were born by both humans and sculptures is also suggested by the Late Iron Age wooden figure from Rude Eskildstrup, Denmark, whose sculpted necklace had its counterpart in gold necklaces, worn by humans (e.g., Holmqvist 1980). Herbert (1984, 218–20), writing on copper in pre-colonial history and culture in Africa, has emphasized that the way a human body is ornamented rarely differs from the way sculptures are embellished. Also, Meskell has written that in ‘pharaonic, Graeco-Roman and Late Antique times there was little distinction between the statue of a deity and the deity itself’ (Meskell 2003, 42). There was no difference whether a
deity was present in the flesh or through a statue, since both contained the presence of a divine numen.

Garments or clothes of the gold foil figures are rarely exaggerated but seems rather to be represented in proportionate sizes. This indicates that the clothes of some figures (see Fig. 4), where exaggeration or abbreviation is lacking, are not open to a variety of interpretations; they are not polysemous and as such may not have been the most important aspects of the bodily representation. Instead they may accentuate the great expertise with which the artisan was able to make miniature clothes. It should also be noted that rarely gold foil figures wear clothes that are portrayed in such a way that they may be used to identify the male or female sex/gender, the way in which we today stereotypically categorize human beings. In her study of garments in the Late Iron Age, Mannering (2006, 42–43) could only categorize less than ten percent of the Danish gold foil figures as being of either of the sexes and having corresponding clothes, and c. 40% of the Swedish gold foil figures. Since the bulk of the figures may not be attributed to the male or female sex/gender, this way of categorizing does not seem to have been relevant. The clothes of some figures, when discernable, have in some instances been found to represent real clothes, since elements from the garments have been retrieved archaeologically from burial contexts (Mannering 2004, 72). This implies that certain garments are connected to specific transitional circumstances such as those between the world of the living and that of the dead. Other non-gendered garments, such as feather-like attires, have likewise been suggested to be connected to other transitional activities such as prophesy making (e.g., Fischer 1974). The fact that the garments and jewellery of the figures have their counterparts in real life or life among human beings (Mannering 2004, 212) underscores the specialized knowledge of the artisan who would have had close encounters with these clothes and the ceremonies in which they participated.

The manipulation of the head, or rather the face of the figures, needs further discussion. Gold foil figures are seen to be engaged in a variety of activities that at times involved the face/head. Insofar as the orifices of the face enable actions the manipulation of the head, or rather the face of the figures is indicative of mask-wearing connected to transitional situations or marginal conditions relating to, for instance, fighting/war/protection, prophesy-making, death, birth, and marriage.

**Added manipulations**

Stamped figures, as well as cut figures, have occasionally been dressed up with golden necklaces and/or golden belts (Fig. 3; see also Watt 2004, figures 14 and 18). A few examples of crudely executed figures have further been equipped with possible phalluses (Fig. 5), and/or appear to have been stabbed by golden items (see figure 31, b–e, in Watt 2004, 200). As reiterated above, the way the figures have been dressed or dolled up probably had their counterparts among human beings. Importantly, the added-on jewellery or paraphernalia – the golden strips – when separated from the figures would probably be interpreted by archaeologists as an artisan’s or smith’s waste, and therefore considered of lesser importance. However, since this so-called waste – in the form of foil fragments – was recovered in the same positions as most of the foil figures (Larsson and Lenntorp 2004, 25), it is possible to conceive of these strips or fragments as important as a variety of props for divine and miniature beings, or indeed as highly stylized and crudely executed divine beings themselves (see figure 18, g–k, in Larsson and Lenntorp 2004, 26).

**Smiths, ritual specialists, and magic**

Above I have described the various ways in which the smith or artisan made and executed the figures. Figure manufacture speaks of a highly sophisticated knowledge of not only dress codes and gestures in a variety of ceremonies but also of an advanced knowledge of the ceremonies themselves. In turn, I argue, this entails knowledge of the cosmologies expressed in ceremonies. Thus, it may be suggested that the smith or artisan was a ritual specialist, familiar with the stories and performances that were taking or going to take place at the Uppåkra ceremonial building.

According to Goldhahn and Oestigaard (2007, 6) another starting point for recognizing ritual specialists in prehistory
lies in identifying rituals that include exceedingly complicated technological processes. At Uppåkra the great variety of raw materials and complexity of techniques mark the presence of highly skilled craftsmen (Hjärtner-Holdar 2002, 175). Further, the fabrication of gold foil figures is in itself a complicated process, requiring great expertise.

Gold foil figures consist primarily of alloys made up of gold and small quantities of silver and copper (Gullman 2004, 112). The smith or artisan would make the figures by melting small quantities of gold (alloy) with a flame and blow pipe. Although gold is ductile, its casting requires the use of bellows or another air source for the furnace; pure gold melts at 1064 degrees Celsius (Jørgensen and Vang Petersen 1998, 29). In order to work a drop of gold into thin foil, repeated heating and steeping is demanded; if this is not done, the metal is easily fractured (Gullman 2004, 113). Since the copper content of the foil may oxidise, the artisan must put the foil into some kind of a cleansing bath, perhaps of fruit juice, to avoid this problem (Gullman 2004, 113). When this was accomplished, patrices were employed to give birth to the figures. The patrices contained figures that were perceived as necessary for the Uppåkra cultic building to function properly and safely, a point to be elaborated below, and some were used several times to create the required number of each specific figure.

This description of the production of gold foil figures is made from a very sterile technological perspective. It is, however, likely that this process was surrounded by other technological doings, perhaps deemed non-necessary by modern standards. These could include uttering or singing magic words and making the figures with only certain or no people as witnesses or assistants (e.g., Barndon 2004 on iron production; and Nakamura 2006 on the making of clay figurines with apotropeic functions). Bodily senses participate in these processes through seeing, hearing, sensuous touch and perhaps even through smelling and tasting. Touch and taste are known to have been used in order to distinguish different qualities of ore used for iron production (Lindeberg 2009, 59).

The artisan making the gold foil figures (and other objects) had extraordinary skills in transforming metals into objects. However this knowledge also entailed the possession, or rather control, of magical powers (e.g., Haaland et al. 2002; Hedeager 2002, 7; Herbert 1984, 1993). As reiterated above, we know that the luminous gold metal was considered endowed with numinous and divine qualities, so the person who was able to transform this heavenly metal would have been special, perhaps even imbued with supernatural powers (Helms 1993, 19; Källén 2004, 192; Lindeberg 2009, 59–60).

The gold used for the figures had been previously smelted many times and was of diverse origin (Gullman 2004:113), indicating that the numen of gods, once spread out in many times and was of diverse origin (Gullman 2004:113), indicating that the numen of gods, once spread out in many times and was of diverse origin (Gullman 2004:113), indicating that the numen of gods, once spread out in many times and was of diverse origin (Gullman 2004:113), indicating that the numen of gods, once spread out in many times and was of diverse origin (Gullman 2004:113), indicating that the numen of gods, once spread out in many times and was of diverse origin (Gullman 2004:113), indicating that the numen of gods, once spread out in many times and was of diverse origin (Gullman 2004:113), indicating that the numen of gods, once spread out in many times and was of diverse origin (Gullman 2004:113), indicating that the numen of gods, once spread out in many times and was of diverse origin (Gullman 2004:113), indicating that the numen of gods, once spread out in many times and was of diverse origin (Gullman 2004:113), indicating that the numen of gods, once spread out in many times and was of diverse origin (Gullman 2004:113), indicating that the numen of gods, once spread out in many times and was of diverse origin (Gullman 2004:113), indicating that the numen of gods, once spread out in many times and was of diverse origin (Gullman 2004:113), indicating that the numen of gods, once spread out in many times and was of diverse origin.

Not dissolved by most other metals, fluids and the like, it may have been connected to notions of time standing still and time-travelling. Gold, by its indestructibility, interwove the past, future and present. The acts of placing gold foil figures in postholes also represent ways of affecting, protecting and projecting a desired future, and at the same time providing a mythological past (cf. Nakamura 2006, 39).

It is interesting that an exact copy of the Uppåkra gold foil figure shown in Figure 2 has been retrieved in Sorte Muld, Bornholm. This implies that the same artisan making the Uppåkra figures also visited Bornholms, and produced figures there. Several researchers have asserted that the artisans of the time would have had their own equipment and that their social position obliged or allowed them to travel to different places (e.g., Bakka 1958; Carnap-Bornheim 2001; Erä-Esko 1965; Lamm 2004; cf. Hed Jakobsson 2003, 157). The fact that gold figure production is documented at Uppåkra, the tools involved in making the figure in question, such as a die, would be expected to be found there. Since this is not the case, it is possible that the artisan who produced the object had been to Bornholm, or was going there.

Smiths have a special position within medieval Norse literature where they are also described as people who are in contact with divine powers (e.g., Hed Jakobsson 2003, 144). Equally, in Late Iron Age Scandinavia gods were considered artisans or craftsmen, a trait Scandinavia shares with many other cultures (Hed Jakobsson 2003, 144, see also Eliade 1971 and Helms 1993). Myths further recount a close connection between smiths and kings (Gansum 2004, 148). In addition, smiths were given nuanced roles in rituals during the period when gold foil figures were manufactured (Gansum 2004, 148). This thought is elaborated by Goldhahn and Østigård (2007), whose discussion of smiths and cremators argues convincingly that an Iron Age ritual specialist in Norway played the role of a transformer and was involved in both the cremation of people and the melting of iron. I will argue that it is possible that the artisan or smith who made the gold foil figures symbolically gave birth to them and dressed them up and also was responsible for depositing them at specific places that needed protection within the Uppåkra building.

The Uppåkra ceremonial building

Excavations during recent years at Uppåkra in southern Sweden have revealed it to be a settlement with intensive and complex activities with large amounts of remains from c. 100 BC to 1000 AD. The Uppåkra building, where most gold foil figures were uncovered, has been interpreted as a house of ritual or ceremonial importance due to its design and remarkable artefacts. In comparison to its modest size (c. 6 by 13.5m) the house was high-timbered with four pairs of roof-bearing posts of very large dimensions (Larsson and Lenntorp 2004, 6). The total length of the posts is estimated to have been a maximum of 8m, or 5–6m above floor level, and the posts had a diameter of c. 0.7m (Larsson and Lenntorp 2004, 29).
The ceremonial building was in use for a long period of time. The surface structure of the house was actually intact for hundreds of years, from the Early Roman period to the Early Viking Age (Larsson and Lenntorp 2004, 7, 18). The gold foil figures can be connected to the construction and tearing down of buildings 12 and 2 (see Fig. 7; Larsson and Lenntorp 2004; Watt 2004). Among the remarkable finds are a magnificent glass bowl and a beaker decorated with gold foil strips that were put intentionally under the floor of House 12, just south of the fireplace, and the excavators suggest that they were deposited when the house was abandoned and a new house, House 2, was constructed (Larsson and Lenntorp 2004, 24).

Fig. 7: The different building phases of the Uppåkra ceremonial house (Source: Larsson and Lenntorp 2004, 7.)

Unfortunately, the positions of all the gold foil figures of the Uppåkra building have not yet been published. However, the position of die-identical figures has been published, which may be used to interpret at least some of the functions of the house and gold foil figures (Fig. 8). These figures in particular speak against the suggested function of the figure foils as temple coins.

A total of 122 gold foil figures were recovered at Uppåkra between the years 1997 and 2004 (Watt 2004, 170). The majority came in one copy only. The figures may be roughly described as follows: some 20 copies of the figures have been categorized as female by Watt (2004), 12 as figures with sexually neuter or conflicting traits, six as double figures and the rest, more than 60, as males. In addition, six figures are cut-outs of thick gold foil.

The most common motif among the males, and in fact of all the figures, is a staff/scepter (see Fig. 2; statistics gathered in Watt 2004), and 11 or 12 dies (patrices) had been used to manufacture them (Watt 2004, 209). The dies produced c. 30 staff/lance figures (counted in Watt 2004, figure 4, 7–10, 17 and 27). One die produced 15 copies (Watt 2004, figure 7), which represents half of the staff/lance carrying figures. I will now offer interpretations of this, the most common motif, but would like to emphasize that there are a number of other figures, or rather events and stories, that are connected to the ceremonial building of Uppåkra. These were equally important for creating and legitimizing a whole cosmos, but will not be treated here.

Fig. 8: The gold foil distribution in the Uppåkra house. Die-identical figures with lances/scepters are mainly concentrated in the post-hole in the north-west (Source: Larsson and Lenntorp 2004, 23, Watt 2004, 176–177). The gold foil figures are shown as white dots. The light grey and dark grey areas show the post-holes and wall trenches of the houses. A fire place in the middle is black.

The figure with the lance/scepter (Fig. 2) has been identified by Hauck (1993) as the god Thor, despite the fact that the common attribute of the deity is said to be a hammer. Such identification processes are highly advanced, however, it is equally important to note that identification must be complemented with interpretations of the specific contexts in which the gold foil figures have been retrieved. In particular, I have emphasized that the performing objects must be understood as playing part in stories or events, where the (re)presentation of a character may not be the most important aspect of the figure (Back Danielsson 2007, 107). Importantly, the enactments involving the figure represented events in which the being shown in the figure performed. Such events or stories may explain a cosmos or a world system as well as the historic and mystic diversity of the community. They are generally used to describe the founding actions of the world, of humanity, of the clan or of a particular institution (Back Danielsson 2007, 107; Mack 1994; Pernet 1992). As such, the stories in which Thor acted are meant to pass on knowledge on how the world is constituted and what it means to live in it and are, in extension, a way of upholding social control.

Remnants of the stories involving Thor can be found in Norse medieval sources. As these are several hundreds of years younger than the gold foil figures, it is far from self-evident that these sources may be used to identify the stories that were enacted through certain gold foil figures. Instead of seeking possible or suitable stories in these later sources for direct analogies, it is less speculative to focus on the characteristics with which Thor acted in some of these stories. Thor is considered to be the strongest of gods and the protector of Asgård, the home of gods, and of Midgård, the
Norse mythology is the myth of an Thor fulfilled duties tangential to that of the protector and keeper of the civilized and organized world, heaven, where celestial powers resided. As god of thunder, (Andrén 2004; Baeksted 1988, 52–54). This pillar, equipped ‘supporting’ large posts hints at the existence of a symbol of connection between the high seat and the gold foil figures equivalence of being in control of the land. The spatial legal instances (Sundqvist 2002, 266–271). From a legal the high seat had a significant role to play in religious and microcosm the divine order in macrocosm (Bertell 2003, offspring becomes the ruler (Bolle 1987). This ruling couple commonly between a god and a royal personage, whose sacred wedding, hieros gamos, stands for a sacred wedding, between heaven and earth, or the chaos-giant Gerd and the god Freyr (Steinsland 1991, cf. Hieros gamos stands for a sacred wedding, commonly between a god and a royal personage, whose offspring becomes the ruler (Bolle 1987). This ruling couple with references to fertility and regeneration mirrors in microcosm the divine order in macrocosm (Bertell 2003, 135). Everything in the ceremonial building is in fact also present in the world of gods.

The high seat reserved for the ruling couple was placed at the northwestern position, where the protective figures with lances were recovered (cf. Herschend 1997, 1998, 1999, 2001 on the possibly shifting places of the high seat during the Iron Age). The gold foil couples of the Uppåkra building (Fig. 4) were found in connection with the northwest and southeast postholes. It has been proposed that the couples represent a sacred wedding, hieros gamos, between heaven and earth, or the chaos-giant Gerd and the god Freyr (Steinsland 1991, cf. Olsen 1909). Hieros gamos stands for a sacred wedding, commonly between a god and a royal personage, whose offspring becomes the ruler (Bolle 1987). This ruling couple with references to fertility and regeneration mirrors in microcosm the divine order in macrocosm (Bertell 2003, 135). Everything in the ceremonial building is in fact also present in the world of gods.

The high seat had a significant role to play in religious and legal instances (Sundqvist 2002, 266–271). From a legal point of view the high seat was inherited together with all other property, and to be able to sit in a high seat was the equivalence of being in control of the land. The spatial connection between the high seat and the gold foil figures ‘supporting’ large posts hints at the existence of a symbol of the cosmic centre, an axis mundi (cf. Bertell 2003; Holmberg 1923). A prominent feature in the cosmological landscape of Norse mythology is the myth of an axis mundi, the world tree (Andrén 2004; Baeksted 1988, 52–54). This pillar, equipped with the posthole-deposited iron door ring, connected different cosmic tiers, that of the underground, earth and heaven, where celestial powers resided. As god of thunder, Thor belonged to the heavenly sphere (Bertell 2003, 82). As a protector and keeper of the civilized and organized world, Thor fulfilled duties tangential to that of the axis mundi (Bertell 2003, 246). To place Thor at this position is thus logical – at this spot Thor could protect – and legitimize – the civilized world of humans and the world of gods against chaos and of the giants.

Large quantities of warriors’ equipment such as the heads of lances and spears, as well as arrowheads, shield bosses, and shield handles, have been found at Uppåkra. A marked concentration of this equipment was recovered from a shallow depression just to the north of the cult house (Helgesson 2004, 223–224). Concentrations of weapons – mainly the heads of lances and spears – were also retrieved in the immediate vicinity of the ceremonial building. Like the other weapons found there, these had been destroyed by bending the points and bat ting the edges (Helgesson 2004, 226). These and other connections to war speak of Uppåkra as a place in need of protection against enemies or malefic forces where the destruction of the weapons may be seen as having apotropaic functions. The placing of certain gold foil figures with protective qualities in postholes was also a way of making the ceremonial building safe and secure.

In several places where gold foil figures have been recovered there is extensive evidence of workshop activities. This is also true at Uppåkra. Necessarily, this means that smiths/artisans and their products were prominent features in these places, not only through the manufacturing of the gold foil figures themselves but also through the manufacturing of a variety of metal goods. Uppåkra also was associated with other transformational changes or processes – those connected to crops, harvesting and grinding. Hed Jakobsson (2003, 173) has rightly emphasized that during the investigated period activities such as smithing and the preparation of food appear to have been analogues. The same was true for finished products and food: they were kennings for one another. A kenning stands for a certain kind of imagery in language, particularly distinguishing the Norse poetry (Marold 1983). There was thus a metaphorical connection between the creation of crops and the manufacture of things. To be able to assist in such metamorphoses and transformations was to be powerful, and it also meant that you possessed certain abilities, and consequently was able to produce wealth and in return offer regeneration. This could explain the close and necessary relationship between kings/rulers and smiths, masters of transformations, at the time.

It is likely that the artisan with his/her enormous skills and knowledge on transformation was also responsible for depositing the very items on which the ceremonial house and in fact the whole cosmos relied and rested upon. Nakamura (2006) recounts examples where high-ranking priests are the manufacturers of wooden or clay figurines used in secret deposits at the corners of residences or palaces in political/religious capitals of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. When making the clay figurines, the priest-exorcist would first go to a specific clay pit and consecrate it with censer, torch and holy water and then add other ingredients while chanting (Nakamura 2006, 29).
Returning to the Scandinavian Late Iron Age gold foil figures, Hauck (1993) suggests that they were made with the help of sacrificial priests, which in turn implied to have deposited the figures in postholes. However, as a specialist in transformations and creator of divine entities and valuable things, the artisan was a ritual expert whose knowledge was tangential to that of a priest. Remembering that the manipulations of the gold foil figures are indicative of transitional situations or marginal conditions such as fighting/war/protection, prophesy-making and marriage (see above), the artisan might also be said to aid in rites of passage. In fact, it is possible to suggest that the artisan’s great or supernatural abilities to securely transform or abridge one state of being to another was implicated in her/his imperative presence in rituals or ceremonies that played on the symbolism of birth and death. As such an expert, the artisan participated in rituals that gave birth to a secure and sacred Uppåkra house, as seen from a number of perspectives. It must also be pointed out that there is no contradiction in seeing the artisan as an outside person with his/her own equipment with the ability to travel to different places such Bornholm and Uppåkra, and seeing the artisan as a ritual specialist making and depositing gold foil figures in a cult house. Smiths or artisans that came from faraway places were in fact considered superior, as having transitional qualities since they moved between well-known settlements and other unfamiliar and hazardous worlds (Helms 1993).

At other places where gold foil figures have been retrieved in postholes, such as Slöinge, Helgö and Borg, gold foil couples predominate. This could indicate that the associated buildings were more connected to notions of regeneration and fertility. Consequently despite shared similarities, each find location – and gold foil character – must be analyzed within its own context.

Concluding summary

In this paper I have argued that gold foil figures can be fruitfully discussed in terms of materiality. The gold foil figures point to the Late Iron Age materialization of something immaterial, a divine being. They are further interpreted as performing objects that were manipulated in different ways in performances. When engaged, the figures were transformed into subjects that obliterated the boundary between living and static dead matter. The smith/artisan was the creator of this being with agency and was also, as a ritual specialist, responsible for depositing them at specific places in the Uppåkra ceremonial building. An earlier interpretation of the gold foil figures as temple coins deposited in postholes, is hereby refuted. Instead it is maintained that the gold foil figures were instrumental in creating, explaining, and protecting the then current world and cosmos inhabited by humans and divine entities. By recognizing that the buildings with figure depositions were expressions of a microcosm in a cosmic geography as well as divine communication, cosmological movement and seasonality, the gold foil figures were, by extension, also part of a means of maintaining social control.

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