

Wiadomości Numizmatyczne, R. LXIII, 2019, z. 207

DOI 10.24425/wn.2019.131220

ROGER SVENSSON<sup>1</sup>

## FORGERIES OF MEDIEVAL BRACTEATES

**ABSTRACT:** Forgeries of coins can either be contemporary or modern. Already in the Middle Ages, it was well known that bracteates were considerably more difficult to counterfeit than two-faced coins. The main reason is that bracteates are struck with a more complicated technology originating from goldsmithing. Therefore, most bracteate forgeries have been produced since the eighteenth century. Compared to original bracteates, modern bracteate forgeries often have the following characteristics: 1) an incorrect weight; 2) a lower relief; 3) sharper contours on the reverse; 4) an artistically clumsy design; 5) evidence of being struck with the same die if there are several specimens; and/or 6) empty fields in the background.

**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** brakteaty, fałszerstwa, średniowiecze, fałszerz, Nicholas Seeländer

**KEYWORDS:** bracteates, forgeries, Middle Ages, counterfeiter, Nicholas Seeländer

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The practice of coin forgery is probably almost as old as the first coins. There are two kinds of coin forgeries: contemporary and modern. The purpose of the former was to make an unfair profit by lowering the content of precious metals in the coins and cheating other people when making transactions. Currently, the collector market value of old coins is generally several times higher than their intrinsic value. Therefore, modern counterfeiters base their work on the value of the coins on the collector market. Thus, modern forgeries do not need to have a lower precious metal content than original ones.

---

<sup>1</sup> The author would like to thank Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum in Brunswick and the University Library at Leipzig University for providing pictures and gratefully acknowledges financial support from the Sven Svensson Foundation for Numismatics, the Gunnar Ekström Foundation and the Olle Engkvist Byggmästare Foundation.

In this article, the analysis focuses on bracteate forgeries. Bracteates are thin uni-faced coins produced through a specific technology originating from goldsmithing. Only one die is used, and a soft material is placed under the thin flan. As a result, a mirror image can be seen on the reverse of the bracteate. Bracteates were common in central, eastern and northern Europe in the period 1120–1520. Until c. 1320, they were strongly linked with periodic recoinage, a monetary taxation system where old coins were systematically renewed at publicly announced exchange dates and fees. In the late period (1320–1520), bracteates were mostly long-lived coins and small change to larger denominations.

This short article is organized as follows. In section 2, it is discussed why bracteates are more difficult to counterfeit than two-faced coins. Section 3 discusses contemporary bracteate forgeries. Modern forgeries produced in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are discussed in section 4. The final section discusses the characteristics of later bracteate forgeries from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

## 2. WHY IT IS MORE DIFFICULT TO COUNTERFEIT BRACTEATES THAN TWO-FACED COINS

There are relatively few forgeries of bracteates in the collector market compared to forgeries of coins from the antiquity and the period 1500–1800. The main reason is that it is more difficult to strike/counterfeit bracteates and obtain their characteristic form than to strike two-faced coins. Two-faced coins are struck with a technology where two dies press the design into the flan (see left part of Fig. 1). Bracteates are struck with a quite different technology originating from goldsmithing (see right part of Fig. 1). Only one (lower) die is used, where the engraving is deeper than the thickness of the flan. A soft material such as lead or leather is placed under the flan, and a flat (non-engraved) cylinder is used as the upper die. When striking the bracteate, it is not the flan but the soft material that is compressed. The design is created by bending the thin silver flan, and the thickness of the flan is not affected. Therefore, a mirror image can be seen on the reverse of the bracteate.

It is also more difficult to counterfeit bracteates due to the extremely thin flan which is 0,06–0,20 mm in thickness. This makes it difficult to cast them. The difficulties in counterfeiting bracteates were already well-known in the Middle Ages. A written document describes how Brandenburg planned to switch from two-faced coins to bracteates (hohlpennigs) in the 1340s, since the latter were more difficult to counterfeit.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Mäkeler 2010, p. 36.

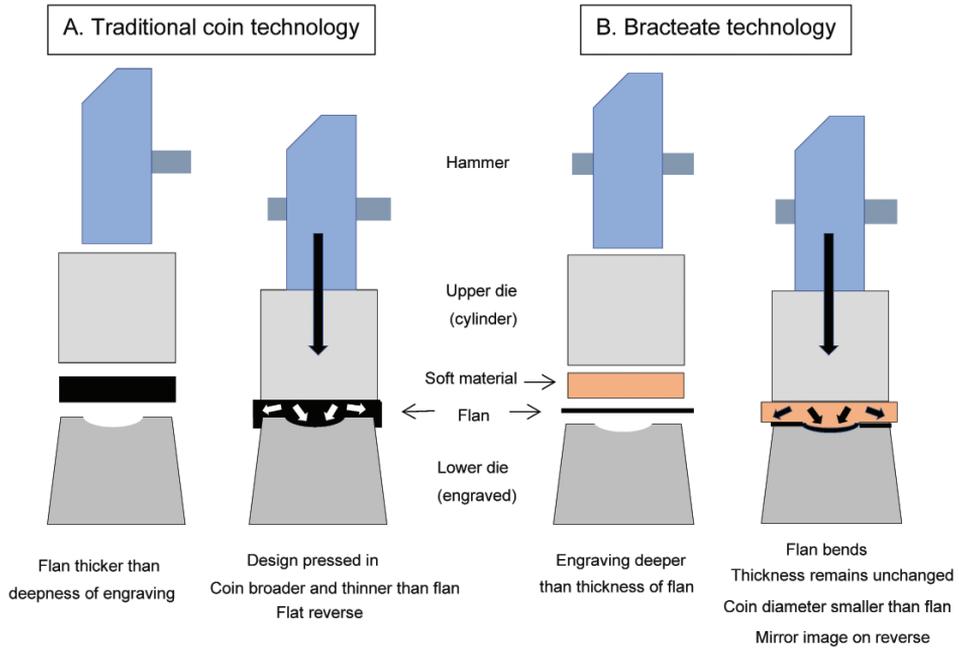


Fig. 1. Difference between traditional coin and bracteate technologies.

Note: The traditional coin technology is depicted with only one die to facilitate the comparison between traditional coin and bracteate technologies.

Another reason to that bracteates are counterfeited relatively seldom is the low prices of bracteates on the collector market. Most medieval bracteates are anonymous and without legends and are thereby difficult to classify. Skilled knowledge is required to collect them, which presses the prices downwards. Therefore, counterfeiters have limited economic incentives to concentrate on bracteates. Instead, the focus is more often on more valuable coins from antiquity or the period 1500–1800.



Fig. 2. Bracteate from Nordhausen c. 1130–1140 struck with a positive die from the reverse. 24 mm and 0.94 g.

Almost all medieval bracteates were struck with a negatively engraved die from the obverse. However, a common misunderstanding is that bracteates struck with a positive die from the reverse automatically must be forgeries. Such bracteates are often but not always forgeries. During the early use of bracteates (1120–1160), many experiments were undertaken before the optimal minting technology was reached. From this early period, some bracteates were struck with a positive die from the reverse (see Fig. 2). There were also late medieval hohlpfennigs struck with a positive die, for example, cross bracteates from Poland and the Teutonic Order in Prussia in the fourteenth century. These bracteate dies were mass-produced through casting (see Fig. 3).

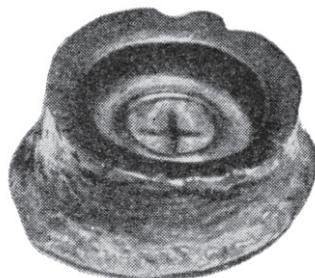


Fig 3. Positive and casted die to cross-bracteates, found in Königsberg. The completed bracteate has a diameter of c. 14 mm. Source: Paszkiewicz 2009, p. 283.

Sometimes, bracteates made of gold are sold on the collector market, but these are commonly regarded as forgeries. To date, there has never been any coin hoard with even a single gold bracteate.

### 3. CONTEMPORARY BRACTEATE FORGERIES

Contemporary bracteate forgeries circulated together with original ones. Such forgeries are rare and difficult to purchase today. They are also very rare in stray finds and coin hoards. However, documents with judicial verdicts and relevant codes are evidence that forgeries existed in the Middle Ages. Penalties could be very severe when forgeries were detected. Both the counterfeiter and those who assisted in circulating the forgeries were often sentenced to death, e.g., they were burnt at the stake or boiled in hot oil. There were also milder punishments, e.g., cutting off a hand or exile. There was a large variation of the penalties between different mints in Germany and other countries.<sup>3</sup>

How the contemporary forgeries of bracteates look depends on *who* counterfeited them. If the forgeries were struck by employees at the mint, the design

<sup>3</sup> Nathorst-Böös 1973, p. 51ff.

and the weight were correct, but the fineness would be below standard. If an outsider made the forgeries, then the forgeries differ from the originals across the board — in terms of design and style, technology and legends.<sup>4</sup> Fig. 4 shows such a contemporary bracteate forgery with low silver fineness struck by an outsider with a false die.



Fig. 4. Contemporary bracteate forgery with very low silver fineness struck by an outsider.  
24 mm and 0.41 g.

#### 4. BRACTEATE FORGERIES FROM THE EIGHTEENTH AND NINETEENTH CENTURIES

Modern forgeries of bracteates have been produced since the eighteenth century and continue to be produced today. The most famous counterfeiter was Nicholaus Seeländer, who lived in Germany between 1683 and 1744. He produced many different false bracteates, partly forgeries of existing types of bracteates but also imaginary bracteates. There is considerable variation in how well-produced these forgeries are, but in general, his forgeries are typically too heavy and have a very fine stamp design, which original bracteates do not have. Furthermore, his forgeries have a lower relief than the originals and miss the soft design of the originals (see Figs. 5–9). Seeländer's forgeries have turned up in different places, even in collections of museums and are so well known that a book about them has been published.<sup>5</sup> There are collectors who specialize in his forgeries, which are often sold for 200–500 euros. However, Seeländer was not the only counterfeiter in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The collector Samuel Heinrich Schmid from Brunswick also counterfeited bracteates.

<sup>4</sup> Kluge 2007, p. 55.

<sup>5</sup> Thiel 1990.



Fig. 5a and 5b. Forgery and original bracteate from Bremen, Bishop Hildbold von Wunstorf, 1258–73. Catalogue: Leschhorn 6558, Kestner 67. Forgery: 23 mm and 0.39 g. Original: 19 mm and 0.57 g.



Fig. 6a and 6b. Forgery and original bracteate from Hildesheim, Bishop Konrad II or successors, 1240–60. Catalogue: Leschhorn 6481, Mehl (Hildesheim) 135. Forgery: 27 mm and 0.72 g. Original: 26 mm and 0.67 g.



Fig. 7a and 7b. Forgery and original bracteate from Magdeburg, Archbishop Wichmann von Seeburg, 1152–92. Catalogue: Leschhorn 6487, Mehl (Magdeburg) 287. Forgery: 24 mm and 0.42 g. Original: 22 mm and 0.87 g.



Fig. 8a and 8b. Forgery and original bracteate from Groitzsch, Advocate Dietrich von Sommerschenburg, 1190–1207. Catalogue: Posern-Klett 1161. Forgery: 36 mm and 0.91 g. Original: 35 mm and 0.85 g.

The Seeländer bracteates also have sharper contours in the design on the reverse of the bracteates compared to original bracteates, which have softer and more blurred contours (see Figs. 9, 10 and 22–30 on Plate).



Fig. 9a and 9b. Forgery and original bracteate from Magdeburg, Archbishop Burckard von Woldenberg or Wilbrand von Käferburg, 1232–35 / 1235–54. MAVRIC-DVX. Catalogue: Thiel 158 and Mehl (Magdeburg) 595. Forgery: 23 mm and 0.43 g. Original: 21 mm and 0.74 g.



Fig. 10. Seeländer-forgery of a Luteger-bracteate from Altenburg. LVT EGE RM ECIT AEC. Compare with Kestner 2972. 38 mm and 0.85 g.

There are forgeries of Swedish bracteates and imaginary Swedish bracteates that were produced in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The imaginary bracteates often have a single letter as the main design (see Figs. 11 and 12). However, there are also forgeries of original bracteates (see Figs. 13–15). These forgeries have a clumsy style, fine stamp design and details that do not flow together. They also lack soft contours on the reverse, since they have often been struck with a positive die from the reverse.



Fig. 11. Imaginary bracteate (crowned R) from the eighteenth or nineteenth century. 14 mm and 0.05 g.



Fig. 12. Imaginary bracteate (V) from the eighteenth or nineteenth century. 14 mm and 0.27 g.



Fig. 13a and 13b. Forgery and original bracteate from King Canute I (1167–96).  
 Forgery: 16 mm and 0.12 g. Original: 18 mm and 0.37 g.



Fig. 14a and 14b. Forgery and original bracteate from King Magnus III Barnlock (1275–90).  
 Forgery: 13 mm and 0.07 g. Original: 14 mm and 0.10 g.



Fig. 15a and 15b. Forgery and original bracteate from King Sten Sture the Elder (1470–97 and 1501–03). Forgery: 12 mm and 0.09 g. Original: 14 mm and 0.22 g.

## 5. CHARACTERISTICS OF MODERN BRACTEATE FORGERIES

In recent decades, several modern forgeries have turned up on the market — particularly online on eBay and other web auctions (see Figs. 16–21). How well the forgeries are produced varies. There are some criteria one can use to reveal and identify false bracteates:

- The weight is not correct. Often, it is too high (Fig. 19);
- The mirrored picture on the reverse has sharp contours compared with originals, which have soft contours;
- The striking lacks deepness (“Vertiefung”), i.e., the relief is lower than in originals. The forgeries give a flatter overall impression (Figs. 16–18);

- They are artistically clumsy and of worse quality than the originals (Figs. 16–18 and 20);
- Details on original bracteates softly flow together, which is not the case for forgeries (Figs. 16–18 and 20).
- If several forgeries of a bracteate type turn up, they are often die-identical (Fig. 19);
- The alloy is not correct.



Fig. 16a and 16b. Forgery and original bracteate from Anhalt, anonymous margrave, 1245–1300. Catalogue: Leschhorn 6535, Thormann 338. Forgery: 21 mm and 0.42 g. Original: 22 mm and 0.87 g.



Fig. 17a and 17b. Forgery and original bracteate from Naumburg, Bishop Berthold II, 1186–1206. Catalogue: Leschhorn 6576, Kestner 1988. Forgery: 36 mm and 0.87 g. Original: 37 mm and 1.00 g.



Fig. 18a and 18b. Forgery and original bracteate from Kołobrzeg (Pomerania), Bishops of Kamień Pomorski, c. 1300. Catalogue: Dannenberg 101a. Forgery: Unknown diameter and weight. Original: 14 mm and 0.31 g.



Fig. 19a and 19b. Forgery and original bracteate from Donauwörth, Emperor Friedrich II, 1215–50. Catalogue: Steinhilber 125. Forgery: c. 23 mm and c. 1.00 g.  
Original: 23 mm and 0.83 g.



Fig. 20a and 20b. Forgery and original bracteate from Memmingen, anonymous emperor, 1260–70. Catalogue: CC 244. Forgery: Unknown diameter and weight.  
Original: 20 mm and 0.47 g.



Fig. 21a and 21b. Forgery and original bracteate from Markdorf, anonymous counts, c. 1250. Catalogue: CC 254. Forgery: Unknown diameter and weight. Original: 20 mm and 0.38 g.

Finally, there are a final criterion used to identify bracteate forgeries. The forgeries often have empty fields or areas in the background that are not utilized (Figs. 18, 20 and 21). Since medieval bracteates were strongly linked to periodic recoinage (at least until c. 1300), it was necessary to change the design of the bracteates between issues.<sup>6</sup> The mint masters and die cutters then needed to utilize the whole miniscule area of the bracteates, displaying a plenitude of different symbols and details, so people could see the difference between valid and invalid issues. One conclusion that can be drawn is that modern counterfeiters do not know that bracteates were linked to *renovatio monetae*.

During the last decade, a new type of bracteate forgery has turned up on the market. The counterfeiters use lasers to scan an original bracteate — preferably in high quality — and create a digital photo. The photo file can then be used

<sup>6</sup> Svensson 2016, p. 1123.

to construct a die. Here, several technologies are available: mechanical cutting, electrical discharge machining and lasers. The design of the forgeries that have used such technologies may be very similar to original ones. However, the counterfeiters have often failed with the specific characteristics of the bracteates; they have missed that details on original bracteates softly flow together and leave few empty areas, and they have failed to produce a soft mirrored picture on the reverse (Figs. 19–21). This failure likely comes from the fact that the counterfeiters have not used the correct soft material under the flan.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

Kluge B.

2007 *Numismatik des Mittelalters: Handbuch und Thesaurus Nummorum Medii Aevi*, Münzkabinett Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin och Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin och Wien.

Mäkeler H.

2010 *Reichsmünzwesen im späten Mittelalter, Teil 1: Das 14. Jahrhundert*, Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte, Vol. 209. Franz Steiner Verlag, Stuttgart.

Nathorst-Böös E.

1973 *Hela världens tjuv*. Norstedts, Stockholm.

Paszkiewicz B.

2009 *Brakteaty – pieniądz średniowiecznych Prus*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, Wrocław.

Svensson R.

2016 *Periodic Recoinage as a Monetary Tax: The Rise and Fall of the Bracteate Economy*, Economic History Review, Vol. 69 (4), pp. 1108–31.

Thiel R.

1990 *Die Brakteaten-Fälschungen des Nicholas Seeländer (1683–1744) und seine "Zehen Schriften" zur mittelalterliche Münzkunde*, Verlag der Heidelberger Münzhandlung, Heidelberg.

#### COPYRIGHT OF PHOTOS

Dr. Busso Peus Nachf., Frankfurt am Main: 8a

Fritz Rudolf Künker, Osnabrück: 2

Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, Braunschweig: 5a, 6a, 7a, 16a, 17a

Leipzig University: 9a, 22–30

Paszkiewicz 2009: 3

Roger Svensson, Stockholm: 4, 5b, 6b, 7b, 8b, 9b, 10–15, 16b, 17b, 18b, 19b, 20b, 21b



22



23



24



25



26



27



28



29



30



Plate 1. Seeländer forgeries. **Fig. 22.** Erfurt, Archbishop Conrad I, 1162–65, 1183–1200. CONRADVS ARCHI-EPIS-COPVS MOG. 30 mm. Thiel 14; **Fig. 23.** Erfurt, Archbishop Lupold von Schönfeld 1200–08. 35 mm. Thiel 15; **Fig. 24.** Erfurt, Archbishop Christian II, 1249–51. +CHRISTIANVS-ARCHIEPI. 40 mm. Thiel 17; **Fig. 25.** Erfurt. Archbishop Gerhard I, 1251–59. +GEBERHARDVS MAGVUNCIE ARCHIEPISCOPVS. 40 mm. Thiel 19; **Fig. 26.** Hessen, Landgrave Heinrich I, 1263–1308. 24 mm. Thiel 52; **Fig. 27.** Hessen. Landgrave Heinrich I, 1263–1308. 28 mm. Thiel 54; **Fig. 28.** Hessen. Landgrave Heinrich I, 1263–1308. 28 mm. Thiel 56; **Fig. 29.** Magdeburg, Archbishop Albrecht von Käfernburg, 1205–1232. Forgery of Bonhoff 721. MAV. 21 mm. Thiel 151; **Fig. 30.** Magdeburg, Archbishop Burckard von Woldenberg or Wilbrand von Käfernburg, 1232–35 / 1235–54. Forgery of Mehl (Magdeburg) 606. 22 mm. Thiel 157.

## FAŁSZERSTWA ŚREDNIOWIECZNYCH BRAKTEATÓW

(Streszczenie)

Fałszerstwa monet mogą mieć metrykę historyczną lub współczesną. Już w średniowieczu dobrze wiadano, że brakteaty stanowią o wiele trudniejszy obiekt fałszerstw niż monety dwustronne. Głównym tego powodem jest bardziej złożona technologia produkcji brakteatów, wywodząca się z technik złotniczych. Dlatego większość fałszywych brakteatów pochodzi z wieku XVIII i późniejszych, przy czym najsłynniejsze z nich, wykonane przez Nicholausa Seeländera pochodzą właśnie z osiemnastego stulecia. Są to monety wymyślone lub kopie brakteatów istniejących. Egzemplarze takie są z reguły zbyt ciężkie i inaczej niż oryginały posiadają starannie zaprojektowane przedstawienie na stemplu.

W ostatnich dziesięcioleciach na rynku pojawiły się współczesne fałszerstwa. W porównaniu z brakteatami oryginalnymi, fałszywe monety mają najczęściej następujące cechy: 1) niewłaściwa waga, 2) niższy relief, 3) ostrzejsze kontury na rewersie, 4) artystycznie nieporadna stylistyka, 5) w przypadku kilku egzemplarzy dowody wskazujące na użycie tego samego stempla i/lub 6) puste pola w tle. Ostatnio wykorzystuje się technikę laserową do produkcji cyfrowych fotografii oryginalnych brakteatów, których następnie używa się do stworzenia stempla. Również i te fałszerstwa mogą zostać wykryte ze względu na fakt, że fałszerze przy biciu rzadko stosują właściwe miękkie podkładki pod krążki.

The author's address:

Roger Svensson

The Research Institute of Industrial Economics (IFN)

P.O. Box 55665, SE-10215 Stockholm, Sweden

e-mail: roger.svensson@ifn.se

ORCID: 0000-0003-3377-8460