

## CHAPTER 3

# ***THE CHARISMA OF EXTENDED BIOGRAPHIES AND AESTHETICS***

## **MIGRATION PERIOD CASES**

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How do legends and stories attached to prehistoric objects affect our senses? And how does this work in combination with aesthetic qualities? Based on a notion that new layers of meaning, through involvement in various contexts, also recent ones, will add charismatic force to an object, my paper explores the regeneration of objects and extended or lengthy biographies. I revisit the Trygslund grave find where a Migration Period gold ring entered into a new life in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, a life that continued at least through three generations. The ring was reinterpreted, and accumulated new meanings in the society of a Vest-Agder valley of that time. My discussion then moves on to the gold bracteate from Teig and explores how the aesthetics of visual appearance affects

charismatic force, in combination with its extended biography. The quality and technology of the bracteate then lead to the aesthetics and mystery of 6<sup>th</sup> century golden scabbard mounts.

Inherent in the biographical approach is the relationship between people and objects, and my intention is to illustrate the idea that it is through such relationships the discussed objects accumulate their biography – and, in consequence, their charismatic force.

## CHARISMATIC FORCE

According to Marianne Vedeler's introductory paper, charismatic objects are objects infused with force, a charismatic power with the ability to arouse awe (Vedeler in this volume with references). This power is capable of affecting our senses and is vitally important for the kind of value we attribute to an object. The following text will explore how charismatic force might enter an object through the relations, memories and legends attached to it. I intend to focus upon the biographies of chosen objects and the relationships they are involved in through accumulated layers of history. I will move on to aesthetic qualities inherent in objects connected to ideas of magic and enchantment, which I think increase

the effect of the charismatic force by making us susceptible to the narratives embedded in their biographies (Gell 1992; Morphy 2006:302, cf. below and discussions in Kristoffersen e.g. 2000a, 2017).

A prehistoric object has participated in human practices through time. It has been used and observed in various contexts, past and present. When found again, excavated or otherwise, it enters history anew and re-engages in the social relations of other ages. Through reincarnation and recontextualization the object accumulates an extended biography – 'beyond different systems of understanding' (Joy 2009:541 with reference to Gillings & Pollard 1999; MacGregor 1999; Moreland 1999). While monuments accumulate biographies from the

changes in the world around them, portable objects can carry lengthy biographies generated through passing through hands and changing according to variations in spatial contexts (Gillings & Pollard 1999:179–180). Gavin MacGregor states that prehistoric artefacts ‘may include a number of resurrections relating to their movement between different ages or different systems of understanding’ and stresses the importance of a sensory approach to the study of extended biographies (MacGregor 1999:258).

I have chosen my particular case studies in order to explore how factors of various kinds and degrees, both extended biographies and aesthetics, add charismatic force to an object. As a point of departure, I will revisit the Migration Period grave from Trygsland, Bjelland in the county of Vest-Agder (Kristoffersen 2003) and consider the charismatic effect of the stories and legends attached to the discovery, emphasizing the gold ring and its new life and relationships in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. To bring the aesthetic effect of visual appearance into the discussion, the text will move on to the large 6<sup>th</sup> century gold bracteate from Teig, Sauda in the county of Rogaland, where, in addition, the relationship between finder and find adds layers of meaning and charismatic

force to the object. The quality and technology of the Teig bracteate lead the discussion into our experience of the aesthetics of 6<sup>th</sup> century golden scabbard mounts and the mystery of their past context. Finally, although exceeding the scope of the book, a written letter about a stone axe will highlight the issue of the spatial context of one’s own farmland.

### **THE TRYGSLAND CASE**

The biography of the Trygsland grave find comprises several pasts. Some of them are closer to our own age and therefore more easily accessible. Through their movement between different ages, the objects from the grave have accumulated qualities that can arouse our senses, not least through the relationships they were involved in during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. There are three somewhat different accounts of how the grave came to light: one given by the representatives of the church; one preserved in local tradition – as ‘the old ones have told it’ (Breilid 1965:280, my translation); and one from the National Museum in Copenhagen where the objects ended up and still remain (Undset 1878).



**Figure 19.** The relief brooch K DCCCXXXII from Trygsland. After Rygh 1885:R257.

I have discussed the grave from Trygsland and the circumstances surrounding it on several occasions (e.g. Kristoffersen 2003), described the objects and analyzed in detail the written sources and the local tradition concerning the 19<sup>th</sup> century events. Here, I will give a short summary and then reflect upon the charismatic potential embedded in the extended biography of the gold ring from the grave.

The farm Trygsland is located far up in a valley in Vest-Agder, the southernmost county in Norway. One day in June 1821 the farmer Ole Olsen (Ole Peerson is also mentioned as the finder) was digging for sand, when he came upon a large stone grave chamber. The chamber contained a well-equipped Migration Period burial from a past probably no one in this valley knew existed. One can only imagine the impression this encounter must have made on Ole Olsen who thought he knew every inch of the farmland. This is also indicated by the drama expressed in the oral and written stories about the discovery (Undset 1878:12-13). The account from the church, passed on by the finder, reports that the stench was so strong that the farmer was forced to leave and come back to continue the next day. In the accession

**Figure 20.** Keyring with keys from Trygslund. After Rygh 1885:R163.

list from the museum in Copenhagen, where Christian Jürgen Thomsen himself catalogued the find, we find the following account: The described artefacts ‘were found on two fully dressed skeletons that were seated in wooden chairs within the mound. The skeletons and the wooden objects collapsed as a result of the grave opening’ (Accession list from the National museum, *Annaler* 1845, my translation).<sup>2</sup> The brooches, in fact three relief brooches of the larger type (R257–262)<sup>3</sup> (Figure 19), a copper alloy key ring with four keys<sup>4</sup> (Figure 20), two cruciform brooches, two copper alloy dress pins, a clasp with gilded silver buttons, two spindle whorls, ceramic pots and a ‘sword’ were sent via Kristiansand to Copenhagen (Undset 1878:12).

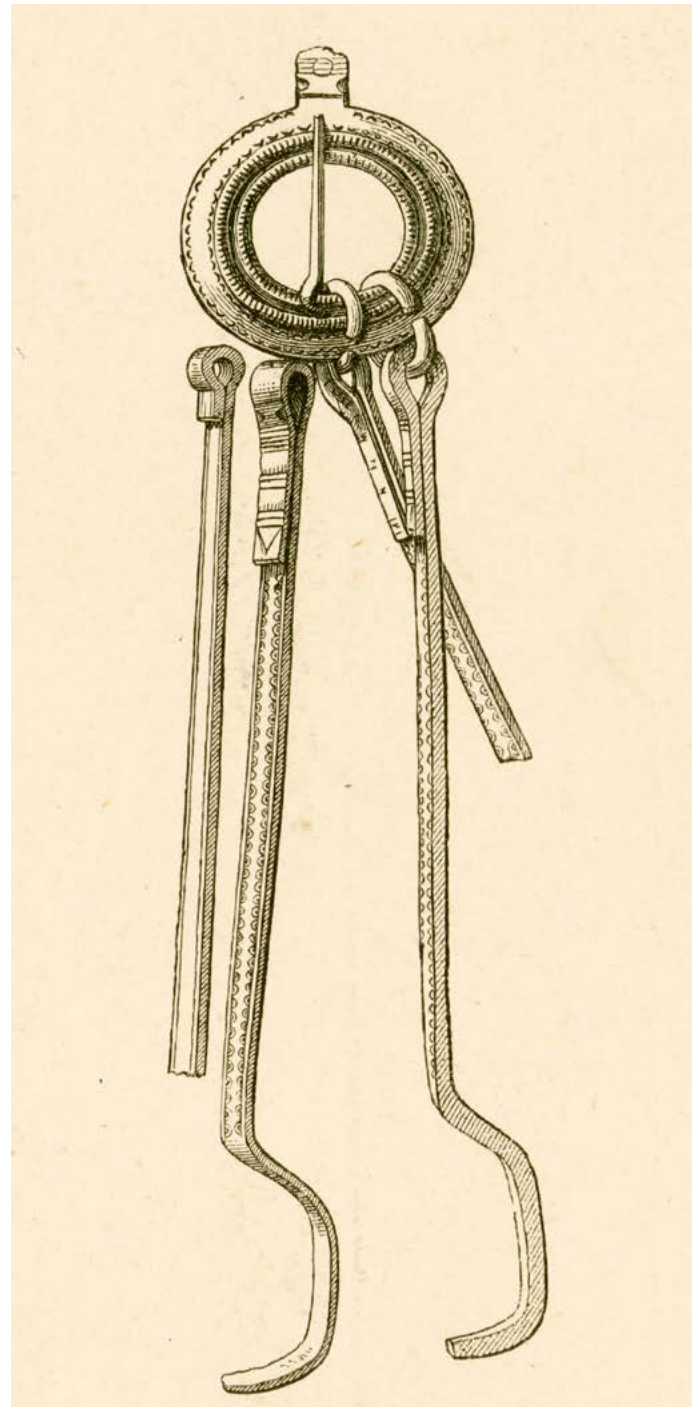
The gold ring, a payment ring with three windings found on the chest of one of the skeletons, was, however, kept in the valley where it entered into a new lifecycle.

The accounts of the discovery and the whereabouts of the objects from the grave at different stages are

<sup>2</sup> Also referred to by Sigvald Undset who saw the find in Copenhagen (Undset 1878, 12-13).

<sup>3</sup> The originals of R257 and R261 are from the find.

<sup>4</sup> R163 is also from the find.



intricate, not always quite clear, and many people are involved. According to the written sources, a man called Ole Trygslund claimed the ring because the mound was situated on his land (Breilid 1965:302; Kristoffersen 2003:141; Undset 1878:11–13). Ole Trygslund was present at the grave opening, and he was the one who hurried to the priest in Bjelland, a Mr. Fleisher, with information about the find and the circumstances surrounding the discovery. The priest sent the account to the *stiftprost* in Kristiansand, Hans Engelhard, who sent it on to the National Museum in Copenhagen, possibly via the bishop there, Fried(e)rich Christian Carl Hinrich Münter. Somewhat later, on different occasions, the objects from the grave followed the account, and at least one of the objects, a pot, via the mentioned bishop.

The son of Ole Trygslund, with the same name, seems to have inherited the ring. He became district sheriff and a man of importance in the valley. Archaeologist and antiquarian Nicolay Nicolaysen reports in 1882 that he saw the ring, and that it was kept by the district sheriff Ole Trygslund (Nicolaysen 1883:206). Nicolaysen also writes that the ring was bent a little to fit the finger of the district sheriff, and that he wore the ring on his wedding

day. Ole Trygslund married Gundvor Torjusdotter from Haugland on Christmas day 1842, and thereafter she wore the ring to church (Breilid 1965:302, 280). The significance of the ring and the new meaning it adopted in the valley might have been affected by a legend about an old king, King Trygve, a relative of Olav Trygvason, who was buried at Trygslund. The grave, when it became known, was believed to be King Trygves grave. Because of the jewelry from the grave, a queen also entered the legend. The relation to this ancient royal pair was preserved in the ring, and probably contributed to its regenerated social significance.

The fact that the ring was kept in its original form and never melted down, gives weight to the importance of the connection between ring, grave and legend. As a payment ring, it was not suitable as a finger ring, and it would have been easy to change it since travelling silver smiths from Setesdalen often visited Bjelland (Breilid 1974:291).

The ring eventually came into the ownership of the daughter of the district sheriff, Anna Trygslund, married Refsnes (Breilid 1965:302). That is the last we hear about the ring in the written sources. However, we know that

in 1998 it actually still existed in the memory of a 94 year old woman, Anna Heggland, who as a child saw the ring at her grandmother's – Anna Refsnes.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, we know that the ring was handed down through three generations during the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and we know that the grandmother Anna Refsnes had the ring early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. After that, there is no information on the whereabouts of the ring.

I have outlined how the objects from the Trygsland grave were brought back to life and entered into various relationships in the 19<sup>th</sup> century – with local farmers and officials, with men of the church and famous archaeologists, such as Christian Jürgen Thomsen in Copenhagen, Sigvald Undset and Nicolay Nicolaysen here in Norway. Included in the find were stunning objects, such as three gilded relief brooches and a set of bronze keys, both probably the first of their kind ever found. Three of these objects are even among the masterly drawn types in Oluf Ryghs basic book *Norske Oldsager* (Rygh 1885). Nevertheless, it is the lost ring that makes

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5 Letter dated 20 November 1998 from Astri Skuland, Head of Culture, municipality of Marnardal, who revealed the information.

the strongest impression. It is thus, I will argue, not the object itself, which we have never seen, but the stories about its regeneration and its changing relationships with people in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that infuse this object with charismatic force, aided by the mystery of its disappearance.

So, the Trygsland grave find can be argued to be a clear illustration of the topic of this paper, but also other finds, documented in the files of the museum archives, carry extended biographies generated by their participation in relationships in more recent times. This is the case with the bracteate from Teig.

## THE CASE OF THE LARGE BRACTEATE FROM TEIG

The large Teig bracteate was made and deposited in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, and was found again in 1944 on the Teig farm in Sauda, the county of Rogaland. In the Sauda area, Migration Period objects are scarce, and the bracteate is actually one of the finest ever found. The farmer Paul Austarheim made the discovery as he was working on his land. In a letter dated 13 March 1946, he gave an account



**Figure 21. a–b.** The large Teig bracteate, adverse and reverse. Photo: T. Tveit, Museum of Archaeology, University of Stavanger.

of the event. The letter is addressed to the director of the Museum of Archaeology at that time, Jan Petersen.

The Teig bracteate is an object with aesthetic qualities (Figure 21), at least judged from our modern, western eyes, often preoccupied with the visual.

Aesthetics is in the widest sense perceived as the way in which we see (cf. discussion in Coote 2006:282–283). Although stating that ‘aesthetic’ is a problematic term, it is, according to Howard Morphy (2006:302), ‘concerned with how something appeals to the senses’ and draws someone’s attention. Jeremy Coote prefers the concept ‘valued perceptual experience’ and argues that all

human activity has an aesthetic aspect: ‘We are always, though at varying levels of awareness, concerned with the aesthetic qualities of our aural, haptic, kinetic, and visual sensations’ (Coote 2006:282). Our ‘visual valued experience’ will notice the golden shine of the Teig bracteate – it is made of pure gold. We will notice the shimmering effect when changing light brings the relief to life. When up close, we will appreciate the intricate animal style. The strangeness/otherness of the abstract and mysterious language of form will intrigue us. We will admire the well-executed ornaments, their firmness and their exotic beauty. We have seen other





**Figure 22. a–b.** The small Teig bracteate, adverse and reverse. Photo: T. Tveit, Museum of Archaeology, University of Stavanger.

bracteates, but this one stands out. Filigree on most bracteates is limited to the triangular field beneath the suspension loop. On the Teig bracteate, filigree, of three or four kinds, also doubled and twisted, give form to the elements that constitute the zoomorphic bodies, divide the various panels and encircle the edge. The Teig bracteate is also larger than most: 6.5 cm across with a weight of 19.01g. Our mind will then wander beyond the observable object and seek the skilled craftspeople who made it. We will reflect on the one who wore it, because we do know that someone in the past did wear it. If we are allowed to touch it, we will turn it around and look for

wear marks on the reverse. Such wear marks are found on the suspension loop and along the edge – probably from rubbing against a woollen cloth. On closer observation, we also see wear marks on the adverse – on the protruding twisted filigree wires that divide the surface into panels. Then we will seek the one who deposited it in the ground, and we will wonder why.

The Teig bracteate (S7130) is a type D bracteate (Axboe 2007; Carlsen 2001:78; Carlsen & Kristoffersen 2003; Hauck *et al.* 1985–1989:IK 536; Kristoffersen 2010; Pesch 2007:314–317). One other bracteate (S11049, Figure 22) is almost identical and was found on the same farm and

within the same field, but differs in size and in number of panels; the larger has three and the smaller two.

The suspension loop of the smaller one has a simpler kind of ornamentation, and the wear marks are even more distinct. The ornaments in the two inner panels are identical. In the circular central panel on both bracteates, a bird figure is easily recognizable by an elegant and precisely executed wing. The bird has a head with a beak, a gold bead encircled by filigree as an eye, as well as a bodyline and a leg with a claw. In the second panel, two antithetical heads meet just beneath the triangular field of the suspension loop. Within a single profile with one eye, also marked by a golden bead, a human nose and a curved beak are combined. Their profile is associated with a zoomorphic body with two thighs in addition to a tail. They have one leg each, a hind leg, elegantly executed and meeting in the middle section at the lowest point in the panel, one foot above the other. The third, narrow panel, more like a border, of the larger bracteate contains two zoomorphic figures with outstretched bodies and elegantly executed forelegs. The hind legs are missing, or they are hidden in the interlaced motifs in the lowest part of the panel.

The Teig bracteate was brought back to life in 1944. Although less dramatic and intricate than the regeneration of the objects from the Trygslund grave, it does enter into a turbulent age and into a new relationship. The event is accounted for in the aforementioned letter (Figure 21). Austarheim writes that in the spring of 1944 he discovered an archaeological artefact on Teig farm, where he lives. It is made of gold, and he identifies it as a Migration Period bracteate. He is aware that one is supposed to immediately hand in such objects to the museum. However, as this was during the war – *‘på grunn av de herskende usikre tilstander under okkupasjonstiden’* – he decided to keep the bracteate until normal circumstances in the country were reestablished. In the meantime, during the war, he kept it in a safe place, safe from all eventualities – *‘på en så forsvarlig måte at det her har vært sikret mot tenkelige eventualiteter’*. Austarheim does not reveal in his letter where he had hidden the bracteate. He now asks whether the museum is willing to receive it – *‘Jeg tør nå anmode Dem om å overta funnet for museet’*. What I think touches me in this letter is the profound respect for an archaeological artefact expressed in the text, and the responsibility the finder assumes, so

that no harm shall come to this wonderful gold object through the dangers of war.

Jan Petersen answers him the following day, with a suggestion that Austrheim should send the bracteate by the post – ‘in a little box, perhaps a matchbox’ (my translation). What Petersen does not know is that the bracteate is far too big for a matchbox. He realizes what an important find this is when it reaches the museum and publishes an article about the bracteate in the yearbook (Petersen 1946). Here he gives a precise description of it and relates it to other bracteates from the area.<sup>6</sup> Petersen refers to the bracteate as ‘*et usedvanligvakkert og sjeldent stykke*’ (Petersen 1946:46–48). He observes the rare execution of the animal ornaments – as more organic and naturalistic than usual on a D type bracteate. He notices the triangular panel beneath the suspension loop as a rare element, indicating the Teig bracteate is an early specimen of this type. Underscoring the impression

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6 His conclusions concerning a local craft tradition were strengthened in 1989, when the second Teig bracteate was found. This one was found by Leif Lykke. Together with Paul Austrheim he was able to show that the two bracteates were found quite close to each other and probably belonged to the same deposition.

of the quality of this bracteate, Alexandra Pesch connects its type of beaded luxury suspension loop with filigree ornaments to the Ålleberg gold collar (Pesch 2015:301–309).

From his letter, we get the impression that Paul Austrheim was not unaffected by his discovery, and that he was struck by the ‘valued perceptual experience’ similar to the one described above. He might have felt an attachment to the bracteate, found on his land, leading to the responsibility we can infer from his letter. He might also have wondered about the connection of this exotic and beautiful object to his farmland.

Based on the filigree and the way this technique has been used in the ornamentation, Jan Petersen sees a connection between the Teig bracteate and the so-called golden scabbard mounts (Petersen 1946:46). With 15 specimens in Scandinavia, and only found here, they are quite rare. Seven specimens were found within the modern borders of Norway. These mounts are objects that meet all our expectations for an aesthetic object, made of gold by craftspeople who fully mastered the ideals of Migration Period art forms, ideals that, as I have previously argued, find their expression in animal art



**Figure 23.** a–b. The golden scabbard mount from Åmdal.  
Photo: K. J. Helgeland, Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo.

objects of high quality (Kristoffersen 2010). We might well conceive the mounts as examples of aesthetic qualities able to bridge time, an argument strengthened by their context, which reveals that they were also valued in the past. They are found only in depositions, alone or together with other gold objects such as payment rings and gold bracteates, and are never found in graves (Bøe 1923:18; Kristoffersen 2000b:181). The mount from Åmdal in Lista in the county of Vest-Agder (C25077) (Figure 23) is found in combination with two payment rings in an area ‘not larger than a hand’ – *‘ikke større enn en hånd’* – just underneath the turf.

There were no signs of any kind of structure, but there were grave mounds in the vicinity. Åmdal is situated on the outskirts of an area rich in Migration Period finds and monuments.

Although defined as scabbard mounts, they have never been found in combination with a sword, and Johs Bøe argues that they are symbolic representations of such mounts (Bøe 1923:18). However, as some of them clearly show wear marks, they must have been used. The upper beaded bar on the back of the Åmdal mount is heavily worn, the beads being almost invisible. It might well have been worn against cloth, and it is likely that it

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Til Skjærpe. anerkendelse.

26. Gjessing har naturligvis at jeg beder  
mig indet om verken om altsager eller andet.  
Både er ikke rigtig tilfaldet; men den dag  
skal det gjøres tanker man ser ofte, og som gør  
det over både den ene og den anden, indtil skam-  
fuldten venter sig. Særlig er det med mig.  
De Rime meddelte, at jeg kommer til byen  
Tirsdag (Arbejdsdagen), og da skal de jo se  
mine tanker. Jeg beder her for, at jeg helst vilde  
beholde den side siden den var fremmed for indtænke  
men, for de ligger meget vist høilideligt for mig, men  
jeg tager dem i hånden, og samtidig tanker jeg  
fordums dage. Vidlagt et inds om mig som at  
jorden, der blev gravet af 1914 var, + er skilt heri skam  
har en tidligere gravsten i 1878? atmed gravsten, m. m.  
Her om skal vi tale mere.

Med det. hilsen  
August Skjærpe

Skjærpe  
9. nov. 21  
Narbo

**Figure 24.** The letter from August Skjærpe. The archive, Museum of Archaeology, University of Stavanger.

has been mounted on a scabbard. The mount seems to be too narrow for a sword scabbard. Perhaps it would rather fit a kind of knife of which we, at least so far, have no knowledge. The function of these mounts is therefore still a mystery. Along with their aesthetic qualities and intriguing find contexts, the mystery increases their charismatic force.

## ON HIS OWN FARMLAND

Obviously, in both the Trygslund and the Teig cases, it is important for establishing a relationship between object and finder that the object was found on the finder's own farmland. This is a connection clearly expressed in a letter dated 22 October 1915, addressed to Helge Gjessing and signed August Skjærpe (Figure 24), a man living on Skjærpe farm, Hå in Rogaland. August Skjærpe had been in contact with the museum on earlier occasions. The previous year he handed in a high quality *Buckelurne*, which led to the excavation of a late Migration Period grave containing, in addition to the pot, three small copper alloy brooches, a relief brooch of the smaller type R256, a copper alloy belt ring

with a knife and a bucket shaped pot (Kristoffersen 2000b:302–303, 378).

August Skjærpe expresses deep concern in his letter – Gjessing must think that he does not care at all about archaeological artefacts nor about the museum. He assures Gjessing that this is not the case. He then reflects upon how one can be troubled by heavy thoughts, yet not do anything about it. Finally, he writes, one is overcome with a sense of shame, and this is now what has happened to him: *'Saaledes er det med mig'*. He just wants to inform Gjessing that he is coming to town on Tuesday, which is market day, and then he will hand in a stone axe. He had wanted to keep it, because he found it on his own land, and because a sense of solemnness comes over him when he holds the axe in his hand and lets his mind reflect upon the past: *'At jeg helst vilde beholde den selv siden den var funden paa eiendommen min, for der er noget vist høitideligt for mig, naar jeg tager denne øks i haanden, og samtidig tænker paa fordums dage'*.

The axe from Skjærpe is a perfectly sculpted stone battle-axe, and it certainly is a sensational feeling to have it in one's hand. It follows from August Skjærpe's account that this object, literally, had passed through

hands. It thus entered into a relationship in a new age. This relationship was not to last, or at least it had to change. Nevertheless, through these events the axe accumulated its extended biography.

## WINDING UP

An important aim of this paper was to outline how charismatic force can be accumulated in objects through the stories connected to their regeneration and extended biography. I have revisited the Trygslund grave and the dramatic tales of its discovery. Particularly the gold ring and the relationships it entered into during the nineteenth century, with local people and clergy as well as famous archaeologists, illustrate how its accumulated biography and its mysterious disappearance create an intriguing and charismatic effect. The reinterpretation of the ring and its new social life are largely due to its mythical relation to an ancient king, a relationship that infused it with agency, agency that contributed to the continuing life history of the ring. It was inherited through three generations and ended, at least up to now, its life in the childhood memories of an old woman. We

have never seen this ring, and aesthetics, or valued perceptual experience, was not a major contribution to its charisma.

Valued perceptual experience, the experience of its golden, shimmering surface and strange ornaments, was essential in the evaluation of the Teig bracteate. Jan Petersen appreciated it as *'et usedvanlig vakkert og sjeldent stykke'* and still most people who come to see it do as well. The bracteate is exhibited together with the smaller Teig bracteate in the Museum of Archaeology. In addition, its extended biography adds another level of meaning to the accumulation of charismatic force. The bracteate regenerated during a turbulent time, and we are touched by the relationship between object and finder, by his care and consideration, bringing it safely through the war. In the Trygsland case as in the Teig case, I have argued that it was significant that the objects were found in a spatial context to which the finders felt an attachment. The letter from August Skjærpe expressing the sensational feeling of the axe in his hand illustrates this perspective.

First of all the importance of a sensory approach to the study of extended biographies was emphasized.

The sensational feeling of the axe in August Skjærpe's hand is also included in Jeremy Coot's concept of aesthetics – as 'the haptic sensation' (cf. above). 'Visual sensations' are present in the golden, shimmering effect and the intriguing ornaments of the Teig bracteate as well as the Åmdal scabbard mount. The legends and stories connected to the gold ring from Trygsland, its dramatic discovery, the relationships it entered into, the memories in which it existed and the mystery of its disappearance, have evoked yet another kind of sensory reaction, which attracts attention and infuses the ring with charismatic force.

## ABBREVIATIONS

R = Rygh, O. (1885)

S = Accession number, Museum of Archaeology, University of Stavanger

All mentioned objects are described in the museum database: <http://www.unimus.no/arkeologi/forskning/sok.php>

