

To Make a Difference – Cultural and Social Change Performed in the Elitist Art of Commemorative Medals in Early Modern Sweden

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In 1662 a medal was made, celebrating the Swedish count Carl Gustaf Wrangel. The obverse depicts him in profile from the chest up, wearing a cloak and armour. Around the edge runs the inscription CAROL GVSTAV WRANGEL. COM. IN. SALM. LIB. BAR. IN. LINDB., (... Count of Salmis, baron of Lindesberg). The adverse is almost fully covered with the Coat of Arms belonging to the Wrangel dynasty. It is ornamented with four knights helmets, and around it are the names of several estates belonging to the family.¹

The object is one of the earliest examples of a non-royal commemorative medal, a medium designed to celebrate and remember the deeds of great men. Princes and sovereigns in Europe have used commemorative medals since the Italian renaissance, perhaps most famously by the French king Luis XIV, who in the late 1600's produced his *histoire metallica*. The purpose of the medium was, except to be beautiful, to spread political ideas and propaganda in the public. The idea of the commemorative medal was first picked up in the 15th century when studying ancient roman coins. Those were often full of meaning and message in portraits, text and not least allegorical pictures.² The coins, like the later medals, had two significant qualities in spreading these messages. The possibilities to manifold the message made possible by the manufacturing process of minting, and the durable materials (in most cases silver, bronze or gold) that allowed them to live on "in eternity".³ The commemorative medal, celebrating individuals, is a media in which the question of social status is manifest and explicit. This paper, as well as my dissertation, is concerned with personal medals, as opposed to royal ones.

¹ VOR. WRANB. EKEBYH SPIKER ET. LVD HO. DOM. IN. SKOG KLOS. BRE ET. ROS D (Vora Wrangelsborg Ekebyhof Spiker et Luderhof Dominus in Skokloster Bremer-Vörde et Rosdorp). Hyckert, Bror Edvard, 1905–1915, *Minnespenningar öfver enskilda svenska män och kvinnor* I–II. Stockholm, p. 52: 2.

² Lagerqvist, Lars O., 2010, "Medaljen – massmedium och multikonst" i *För efterkommande Kungl. Vetenskapsakademiens medaljer 1747–2007* (red. Cecilia Bergström) Stockholm, p. 27; Hedlund, Ragnar, 2008, "...achieved nothing worthy of memory". *Coinage and authority in the Roman empire c. AD 260–295*. Uppsala, pp. 27–34.

³ Adlerbeth, Gudmund Jöran, 1791, "Anmärkingar rörande det som förnämligast bör i akt tagas vid skådepenningars uppgifvande" i *Kungl. Vitterhets- Historie- och Antikvitetsakademiens Handlingar* II, p. 114.

Estate and pedigree

The medal of Wrangel is in many cases typical for its time. It depicts one of the highest ranking individuals in Swedish society. At the time the medal was struck, Wrangel held some of the highest offices in the realm, both in military and civil administration. He was Senator of the Realm, Admiral, Field Marshal and General Governor of Swedish Pommern. As already mentioned, the commemorative medal was first a royal medium, closely connected with coinage, and therefore only available to the head of state. When non-royals began making these objects in the middle of the 17th century, it was exclusively done by persons from the very top of society. Before the 1670's all medals depicted noble persons. The Swedish noble estate was from 1626 divided in three classes, where the top class consisted of counts and barons. All the people celebrated in commemorative medals before the 1670's belonged to this class. Just like Wrangel, they were all, with only one exception, senators of the realm.⁴

What is of interest is that, although he had some of the highest state official titles available, none of them are mentioned in the medal. What *is* mentioned though is Wrangel's position as feudal landowner. Both his noble titles and the mentioning of estates points to the idea of a nobility with strong regional powers. The Coat of Arms also signals the idea of an inherited ascribed social status. This was also typical for the time. Up until the mid 1660's all titles are concerned with the *noble* status. Per Brahe was in 1665 titled COMES IN WISINGSBOURG (Count to Visingsborg), as was his uncle in 1614, where the inscription reads MAGNUS. CO in Wising, and Magnus Gabriel de la Gardie in a medal from the 1650's MAGNVS GABRIEL DE LA GARDIE COMES DE LECKO ET ARENSBORG (... Count of Läckö and Arensburg). They also show the family's Coat of Arms. The portraits depict the person dressed in armour, signalling the fighting role of nobility.⁵

Thus it is clear that the personal commemorative medals of the mid 1600's follow the same visual language – a language that emphasized pedigree, regional power and the noble role as a warrior class. Looking at the royal coinage from the time there are some, in a quite literal sense, striking similarities. The *riksdaler* of Charles X Gustav from 1654 shows the portrait of the king in profile from the chest up, hair and clothing similar to the personal medals and the reverse shows the Royal Swedish Coat of Arms. The high positioned noble elite of the mid 17th century Sweden was in its visual language closely connected to the royal status. The medals seem to convey the idea that these counts and senators wished to present themselves as in some sense equal to the king. They used the same language, but were merely rulers over smaller territory.

⁴ The exception was Mattias Palbitzki, who had been offered a place in the senate, but turned it down.

⁵ Hyckert 1905, pp. 61: 3, 23, 67: 2.

Virtue as argument

Less than two decades after the medal of Wrangel, a medal was struck in commemoration of Bengt Horn for his funeral in 1679.⁶ On the obverse Horn is depicted similarly as the earlier portraits, in profile from the chest up, only this time with a bigger wig. However, the title surrounding the portrait is different. It reads BEN: HORN. R: S: SENATOR (Senator of the Swedish Realm). On the reverse is a picture of two women, impersonations of Fortune and Virtue, sailing a boat on the ocean. Fortune holds a sail to catch the wind, while the Virtue sits by the rudder. Round the edge runs the inscription: VTRIVS: QVE. AVXILIO (With the help of both). The analogy is clear: Bengt Horn was a successful warrior and statesman, with an excellent carrier behind him. He became field marshal, senator of the realm and president over Svea hovrätt (Svea Court of Appeal). His success in life, and his prominent place in society, is in the medal explained by his virtues qualities. Fortune was often depicted similar to this, but with an important distinction: usually she stands on a slippery ball, indicating the shifting nature of luck. Here though, she stands steadily in a boat, steered by Virtue. Fortune had brought him forward, but Virtue had steered his way.

The expression in this commemoration is argumentative. The medal tells us that Horn had been successful, that he had hold one of the highest positions in the realm, *because* he was virtuous. This signals an idea of achieved, rather than ascribed, status. The element of virtue is recurrent in medals from the late 1600's, and there are several motifs similar to this. Most of the medals connect with the classical ideal of the Cardinal Virtues. This is an important difference towards the earlier medals, where the social position of a person was *stated* but not *defended*, through expressions of the person's high moral fibre. The expressions consist of antique allegorical pictures that tells the viewer that the elite of the late 1600's was educated.

Another significant change is in the title. While the early medals presented the person with his noble status and landed property, this medal put forward a position, an office within the state. This never happened before the mid 1660's, but it was standard from the *late* 1660's. Gustaf Bonde was in 1666 presented as Treasurer of the Realm, as was Seved Bååt two years later and Sten Bielke in the 1670's. Klas Rålamb was in 1674 titled Senator, just as Horn was in 1679.⁷ All of these medals present persons from the titled high nobility as holders of offices within the state, that is, under the king. The ideas of high social status, as it is shown in the art of medals in the late 1600's, was based on high political office, reached by qualities of virtue.

⁶ Hyckert 1905, p. 57.

⁷ Hyckert 1905, p. 45: 1, 46, 63, 81: 1.

The argumentative expressions and the new use of titles, show that the ideas about social status in the Swedish elite during the late 1600's became more concentrated on personal merit and personal qualities. The commemorative medals began to show an element of argumentation. The social hierarchy was no longer self-evident – it had to be argued for. Social status was no longer ascribed – it had to be achieved, at least in its ideal form. It also shows that the elite in the late 1600's had accepted a royal supremacy. They no longer manifest themselves as regional princes. At the end of the century, it was the state – not the pedigree – that provided the titles. The nobility no longer presented itself as equal to the king. Their social status was now instead dependent on their position within the state and under the crown. The social status was no longer due to the person, but to the position he held.

All the early examples of this, except maybe Rålamb, represent old, landed nobility with high noble titles. This questions the notion that a new, educated nobility brought forward new ideals based on civil service. A study of commemorative medals rather suggests that the changes of ideals come from within the old culture of nobility, and perhaps made way for social change – and not the other way around. During the last decades of the 17th century, beginning in the 1670's, a lower nobility without high noble titles started to appear in the medium. That, however, happened *after* the established elites had made a change in the discourse by using titles referring to service within the state, rather than noble titles. All the examples given above are also from before the royal autocracy of Charles XI. It thus challenges the idea that the absolutism was the key cause for changes in conceptions of social status, as have been claimed by most previous research.

Achievement and the inflation of honour

About a hundred years after the medal of Horn, and five years after his death, a medal was made in celebration of the famous chemist Carl Wilhelm Scheele.⁸ The medal was made in 1791 and depicts on the obvers Scheele in profile, without clothing. Around the edge runs the inscription CARLOLUS WILHELM SCHEELE CHEMICUS. The adverse shows a glass bowl in which coal is burning in oxygen. Other chemical instruments are seen at the sides. Over the image is the text INGENIO STAT SINE MORTE DECUS, which roughly translates to “His genius makes his fame immortal”. At the bottom of the picture is a text that in translation reads “The Royal Academy of Science in Stockholm dedicates this medal too its member that was prematurely taken by death”.

⁸ Hyckert 1905, p. 295: 1.

The motto on the adverse is a quote from Propertius elegies. Together with the bare portrait, this is the only sign of a classically inspired educational ideal. All the other expressions concerns Scheele's work as a scientist. The title on the obvers presents him as chemist. This signals the idea of social status as completely based on individual success within his profession. This is also true for the images on the adverse, depicting chemical tools. The glowing glass bowl depicts Scheele's likely most important chemical result – the discovery of oxygen and its necessity for fire. It was his merits within the field of science that had made Scheele a great man an example worthy of remembrance. His social status was, like his contemporaries, *achieved* by meritorious work and success within his occupational field.

Scheele was a commoner, without noble pedigree. Non-nobles started to appear in the medium of medals during the first half of the 18th century. During this period, 24 out of 99 medals depicted commoners (24 %). In the second half of the century this number had increased to 58 out of 135 (43 %).⁹ But once again the expression did not come from the “new” groups. Rather, these groups of common elites used a language that had been introduced as part of a noble culture of merit in the late 1600's. Starting with warriors and state officials (like Horn above) the noble culture had emphasised merit for about one hundred years before the medal of Scheele was made. The common scientists of the 1700's merely transformed the expression to fit their activity and for them available forms of capital.

Performing change

The fact that new expression for social status time after time came from established status groups, and not from challenging “social climbers”, as well as the fact that important changes in the discourse preceded major political changes, suggests a somewhat new way of viewing the concept of discourse. Rather than seeing discourses as a way to establish power relations and hegemony, I want to argue that they are constantly and unavoidably changeable. Social status is a constantly on-going negotiation of insufficient resources, and is therefore constantly challenged. The reason for that changes come from established groups is that they have the influence to make that change. In doing so they change the discourse and thereby the possibilities for others to use the language in new ways.

During the 17th and 18th centuries, Swedish political governance changed from aristocratic parliamentary government to royal autocracy no less than two times; each time did the established elite of nobles lose influence to new political groups. I want to argue that these changes came about as a result of changing conceptions of social status. Previous research has to

⁹ Johansson, Martin, *Äreminnen. Personmedaljer och social status, ca 1650–1850*. Unpublished manuscript.

a large extent explained social changes during the era as results of political decision-making.¹⁰ Politics, however, did not happen in an ideological or cultural vacuum. Decisions were based on conceptions about right and wrong, good and bad, what was highly valued in society and what was not.

To say that social and political changes came about as a result of changing ideas is not really to answer the question of what brings on changes in society. The inevitable question is still present: if ideological change brings on social change, then what makes ideological change happen? As a possible answer to this, I suggest adopting the concept of performativity. Instead of viewing the pictures and texts presented in the medals as merely expressions of pre-existing conceptions of social status, I am exploring the possibility that the ideas of what was seen as desirable was constituted in language, images and objects, such as the commemorative medal.¹¹ The action of making a medal is therefor seen as a performative act, carried out in order to form the concept of social status, expressions of status, and ultimately to form society in a certain direction. To make a medal was also to make social relations.

¹⁰ E.g. Carlsson, Sten, 1973, *Ståndssambälle och ståndspersoner 1700–1865. Studier rörande det svenska ståndssambällets upplösning*. Lund; Carlsson, Åsa, 1994, *Den jämlike undersåten. Karl XII:s förmögenhetsbeskattning 1713*. Uppsala; Ericsson, Peter, 2002, *Stora nordiska kriget förklarar. Karl XII och det ideologiska tilltalet*. Uppsala.

¹¹ The argument is inspired by J. L. Austin, Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler. Austin, J.L., 1962, *How to Do Things with Words*; Derrida, Jacques, 1982, “Signature, Event, Context” in *Margins of Philosophy*; Butler, Judith, 2007, *Genustrubbel. Feminism och identitetens subversion*.