Bracteates – the Thinnest Coins of Monetary History

Bracteates were doubtless the most curious and interesting types of coins among the pfennigs of the German Middle Ages. Whereas traditional pfennigs bore different images on obverse and reverse, bracteates were minted on one side only. Their obverse showed the image as embossed relief, while on the reverse it was indented. Additionally, most images on bracteates were strictly symmetric. This allowed to break the coins neatly in two, for this is what people did in order to get small change.

Bracteates were issued for local circulation. The ephemerality of these coins stood in harsh contrast to their high quality – a quality that medieval coinage in Germany reached neither before nor after ever again. For far trade or long-term use, bracteates were too fragile. In economically developed regions they therefore never achieved acceptance. In those parts of Germany, people preferred the solid two-sided pfennigs.

Holy Roman Empire, Margraviate of Brandenburg, Albert the Bear (1123-1170), Pfennig (Bracteate), Wegeleben

Denomination:	**Pfennig (Bracteate)**
Mint Authority:	**Margrave Albert the Bear**
Mint:	**Wegeleben**
Year of Issue:	**1123**
Weight (g):	**0.82**
Diameter (mm):	**27.0**
Material:	**Silver**
Owner:	**Sunflower Foundation**

Albert the Bear, whom we see on this penny, was a man who – be it by diplomacy, be it by force –, took every opportunity for expansion. From early on, he concentrated his interest on the eastern territories. Albert is held as one of the initiators of the Wendish Crusade of 1147. Ten years later, he conquered Brandenburg and became the first Margrave of Brandenburg.

Hence Albert was one of the key figures in the German eastward expansion. He settled Friesians and Saxons on his lands and was very active at proselytizing the Slavs. Being good Christians, Albert and his wife Eilika Billung of Saxony went on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, together with the bishop of Halberstadt. With powerful Halberstadt, Albert maintained a good relationship anyway. For that reason, some of the coin dies for Albert's pennies were cut there.

Holy Roman Empire, Duchy of Braunschweig, Henry the Lion (1139-1195), Pfennig (Bracteate)

Denomination:	**Pfennig (Bracteate)**
Mint Authority:	**Duke Henry the Lion**
Mint:	**Braunschweig**
Year of Issue:	**1139**
Weight (g):	**0.8**
Diameter (mm):	**29.0**
Material:	**Silver**
Owner:	**Sunflower Foundation**

The design on this bracteate is descriptive: Every contemporary knew immediately that the coin was issued by Henry the Lion, the duke of Saxony and Bavaria, and one of the most powerful rulers of the 12th century. The centre of Henry's realm was Braunschweig, where he had a famous monument erected that can be seen up to this day. It is the so-called Braunschweig Lion, the oldest freestanding sculpture of the Middle Ages north of the Alps.

Holy Roman Empire, Walter II of Arnstein (1135-1166), Pfennig (Bracteate), Hettstedt

Denomination:	**Pfennig (Bracteate)**
Mint Authority:	**Count Walter II of Arnstein**
Mint:	**Hettstedt**
Year of Issue:	**1150**
Weight (g):	**0.83**
Diameter (mm):	**29.0**
Material:	**Silver**
Owner:	**Sunflower Foundation**

Around 1150, Walter II of Arnstein began minting coins in Hettstedt. His die-sinker was none other than Erhard of Elhar, who is often held for one of the founders of the art of bracteates. The artist certainly deserves this commendation, because his dies distinguished themselves by their clear composition. Elhar always surrounded his designs with a strong ring, and filled empty spaces in the coin's field with little ornaments. The artist was also working for other mint authorities – possibly even for the powerful Albert the Bear of Brandenburg.

This pfennig from Hettstedt depicts the eagle of Arnstein over a large arch with two sideways towers. Within the arch is a palmette, and the space next to the eagle is filled with rosettes and square marks. The whole design is enclosed by a sharp-cut circle – one of Elhar's typical compositions thus.

Holy Roman Empire, Münzenberg and Wetterau, Kuno of Münzenberg (*c. 1151, † 1212), Pfennig (Bacteate)

Denomination:	**Pfennig (Bracteate)**
Mint Authority:	**Count Cuno of Münzenberg**
Mint:	**Münzenberg**
Year of Issue:	**1151**
Weight (g):	**0.72**
Diameter (mm):	**30.0**
Material:	**Silver**
Owner:	**Sunflower Foundation**

This bracteat, a light pfennig minted on one side only, shows a descriptive design: Since only very few people could read in the Middle Ages, the origin of money had to be indicated otherwise. Our bracteat bears the bust of Lord Kuno under an arch, holding a sword and a decorated shield. Between the towers above the arch are two stalks of mint, referring to Münzenberg (Minzenberg = mint mountain).

Holy Roman Empire, Duchy of Saxony-Wittenberg, Bernhard (1180-1212), Pfennig (Bracteate)

Denomination:	**Pfennig (Bracteate)**
Mint Authority:	**Duke Bernhard of Saxony-Wittenberg**
Mint:	**Wittenberg**
Year of Issue:	**1180**
Weight (g):	**0.65**
Diameter (mm):	**28.0**
Material:	**Silver**
Owner:	**Sunflower Foundation**

With the beginning of the 11th century began the development of the lands of Saxony. Roads were built and settlements founded, and in the course of the 12th century, the first towns began to emerge – like Wittenberg, which was first mentioned around 1180.

Living in towns and large villages requires money, because goods have to be valuated and purchased. Hence in Saxony around that time, the minting of local bracteates began. This coin was issued in Wittenberg by Bernhard of Saxony. The motif is plain and somewhat clumsy. It shows the duke in profile and the legend BERNARDVS DVX. This is unusual, as bracteates typically did not bear any scriptures.

Holy Roman Empire, Bishopric Augsburg, Udalschalk of Eschenlohe (1184-1202), Pfennig (Bracteate)

Denomination:	**Pfennig (Bracteate)**
Mint Authority:	**Bishop Udalschalk of Eschenlohe**
Mint:	**Augsburg**
Year of Issue:	**1184**
Weight (g):	**0.91**
Diameter (mm):	**26.0**
Material:	**Silver**
Owner:	**Sunflower Foundation**

Until the 13th century, the pfennig was the only currency in the Holy Roman Empire. It was minted regionally different, however: While pfennigs had traditionally been stamped on both sides, it became a new fashion to mint them on one side only. In the Bishopric of Augsburg it was Bishop Udalschalk who issued these new style pfennigs for the first time. They bore the image of the Bishop with the episcopal signs, the miter and the infula.

Holy Roman Empire, Frederick II of Hohenstaufen (1194-1250), Pfennig (Bracteate), Imperial Mint Mühlhausen

Denomination:	**Pfennig (Bracteate)**
Mint Authority:	**Emperor Frederick II of Hohenstaufen**
Mint:	**Mühlhausen**
Year of Issue:	**1194**
Weight (g):	**0.46**
Diameter (mm):	**37.0**
Material:	**Silver**
Owner:	**Sunflower Foundation**

The issue of bracteates – thin pfennigs that were minted on one side only – began around 1130 and reached its artistic peak in the second half of the century. Around 1200 artistic decline began, and the bracteates of the 13th century already give the impression of being struck carelessly and without any skill.

This bracteate from the 13th century was minted in the imperial mint of Mühlhausen in Thuringia. It depicts a king with a flag and a shield on horseback; behind the rider is a wheel, and on the edge are three pellets and a laying S. The coin supposedly was an issue of Emperor Frederick II, yet it could also be of his predecessor Otto IV.

Holy Roman Empire, Bishopric of Constance, Konrad of Tegernfeld (1209-1233), Pfennig (Bracteate)

Denomination:	**Pfennig (Bracteate)**
Mint Authority:	**Bishop Konrad of Tegernfeld**
Mint:	**Constance**
Year of Issue:	**1209**
Weight (g):	**0.52**
Diameter (mm):	**21.0**
Material:	**Silver**
Owner:	**Sunflower Foundation**

The city of Constance became immediate to the emperor in the year 1192. At the same time, the bishops of Constance began their coinage. The coins depicted the bishops with their clerical insignia, the mitra and the episcopal staff.

At that time, Constance and Zurich belonged to the same currency district. Coins like this bracteate were called the Constance pfennigs, which is proof of how important they were for local and regional trade.

Holy Roman Empire, Bishopric of Constance, Konrad of Tegernfeld (1209-1233), Pfennig (Bracteate)

Denomination:	**Pfennig (Bracteate)**
Mint Authority:	**Bishop Konrad of Tegernfeld**
Mint:	**Constance**
Year of Issue:	**1209**
Weight (g):	**0.37**
Diameter (mm):	**20.0**
Material:	**Silver**
Owner:	**Sunflower Foundation**

In the region around the Lake of Constance circulated a special form of bracteates during the 12th and 13th centuries. These bracteates were of small diameter – up to 23 millimeters – and characterized by a special type of rim: until about 1230, the edge was ornamented with a ring collar and a circle of big pearls. The archetypes for these bracteates were the coins from the bishops of Constance.

The bracteate shown here was minted during the rule of Bishop Konrad of Tegernfeld. It has all the characteristics of a typical Constance bracteate: the diameter is merely 20 millimeters, the coin is framed by a circle of pearls and a ring collar, and the image is symmetrical.

Holy Roman Empire, Frederick II of Hohenstaufen (1194-1250), Pfennig (Bracteate), Imperial Mint of Donauwörth

Denomination:	Pfennig (Bracteate)
Mint Authority:	Emperor Frederick II of Hohenstaufen
Mint:	Donauwörth
Year of Issue:	1215
Weight (g):	0.77
Diameter (mm):	25.0
Material:	Silver
Owner:	Sunflower Foundation

The German title to the throne was not hereditary in the Middle Ages – the German king was elected by the archdukes and could also be dethroned. It is thus not surprising that a constant tussle was going on among the German higher nobility for the royal throne. The keenest competitors for the title were the Hohenstaufen and the Guelfs. After his father, Frederick Barbarossa, had been German King and Emperor, Henry VI tried to make the claim to the throne hereditary and pass it on to his son. He did not succeed, yet Henry VI did manage to bring the Guelf mint in Donauwörth under royal control. His son, Frederick II, also struck his coins in Donauwörth. Our bracteate depicts the king's bust and a falcon, for after all, Frederick had written a handbook on the art of breeding and training hunt falcons.

Holy Roman Empire, Frederick II of Hohenstaufen (1194-1250), Pfennig (Bractate), Imperial Mint of Ravensburg

Denomination:	**Pfennig (Bracteate)**
Mint Authority:	**Emperor Frederick II of Hohenstaufen**
Mint:	**Ravensburg**
Year of Issue:	**1240**
Weight (g):	**0.3**
Diameter (mm):	**21.0**
Material:	**Silver**
Owner:	**Sunflower Foundation**

In 1191, Emperor Henry VI of Hohenstaufen took over the mint of the duchy of Ravensburg and turned it into an imperial mint. The bracteates depicted the town gate of Ravensburg with both its towers.

When Henry's son Frederick II became king in 1215, he changed his father's coin motif. The Ravensburg bracteates now illustrated the Frederick's bust between the two towers.

Ravensburg belonged to the monetary circle of the Constance pfennig, whose coins were characterized by a common edge decoration. Between about 1230 and 1250 the decoration was a combination of crosses and squares (or circles).