

Swastika-shaped fibulae with horse-head decorations (Almgren 232) from the Roman period in Dobrudja (Moesia Inferior)

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Abstract. *Discovered in a large number in the Balkan-Danubian provinces of the Roman Empire, the swastika-shaped fibulae with horse-head decorations are in most cases attributed to the military. The iconographic motive and form are the artistic expression of Thracian traditions specific in the Lower Danube regions. The precursors of this type of brooches are the silver brackets found in Thracians princely graves discovered in Romania and Bulgaria dated in the 4th century BC. Chronologically framed in the 2nd–4th centuries AD, the roman fibulae are discovered mainly in military environments. On the territory of Dobroudja (Moesia Inferior), four brooches of this type are known, one at Ulmetum and three in the civil settlement near the camp of Durostum, at Ostrov-Ferma 4.*

Rezumat. *Descoperite într-un număr ridicat în provinciile balcano-dunărene ale Imperiului Roman, fibulele svastică cu terminațiile brațelor în formă de cap de cal sunt atribuite în cele mai multe cazuri militarilor. Motivul iconografic și forma sunt expresia artistică a unei tradiții tracice specifice Dunării de jos. Precursorii fibulelor sunt aplicile de argint descoperite în mormintele princiare tracice de pe teritoriul României și al Bulgariei, datate în secolul al IV-lea a.Chr. Încadrate cronologic în secolele II–IV p. Chr., fibulele sunt descoperite cu precădere în medii militare. Pe teritoriul Dobrogei sunt atestate până în prezent patru fibule, una la Ulmetum și trei în așezarea civilă de la Durostum, în punctul Ostrov-Ferma 4.*

Keywords: Moesia Inferior, Ulmetum, Durostorum, fibulae, 2nd–4th century AD.

Introduction

The publication of this article came from the necessity of filling the bibliographic gap that specialized literature had on this subject, being at the same time a topic of debate at two international conferences, one held at the Université d'Angers in France in 2015 and the second in the workshop "Scythia. The province's economic and commercial relations with the Roman world", which took place in Tulcea, Romania in October 2017. The number of swastika-shaped fibulae with horse-heads decoration discovered in Dobrudja is not very large compared to

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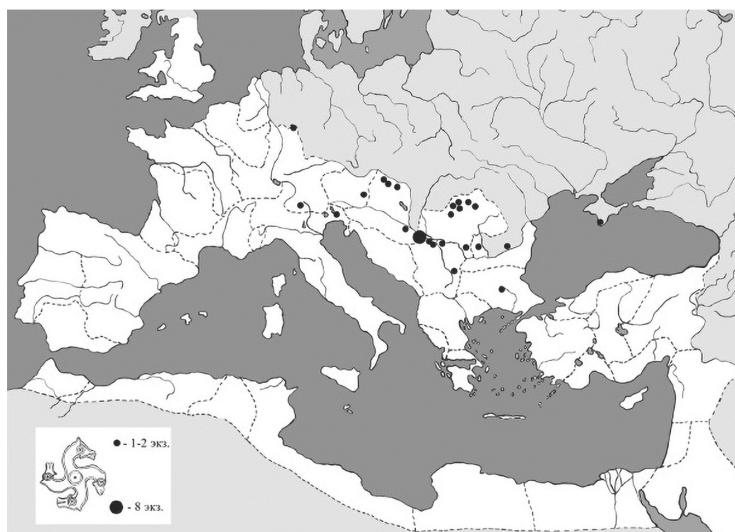


Figure 1. The distribution of the swastika shape fibulae with horse-head decorations in the Roman Empire (KOSTROMICHYOV 2012)

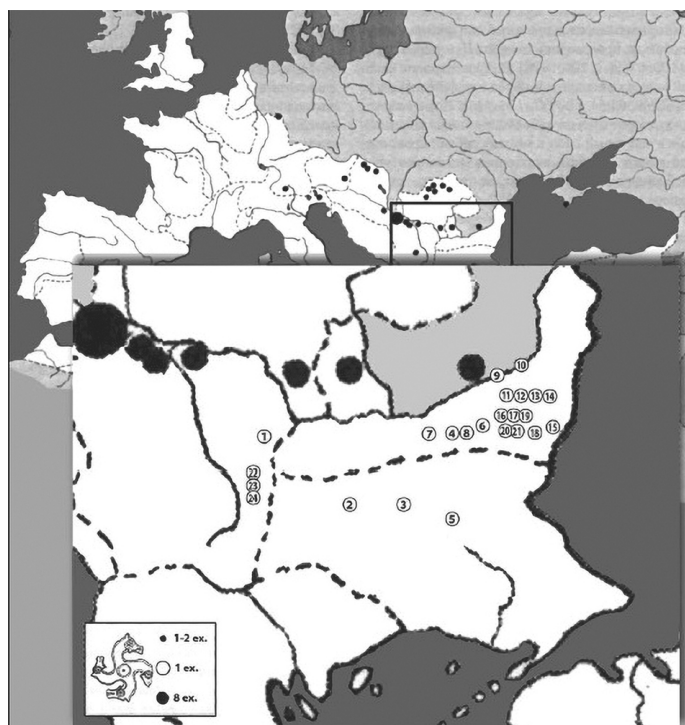


Figure 2. The distribution of the swastika shape fibulae with horse-head decorations in the Balkans (HARALAMBIEVA 2014)

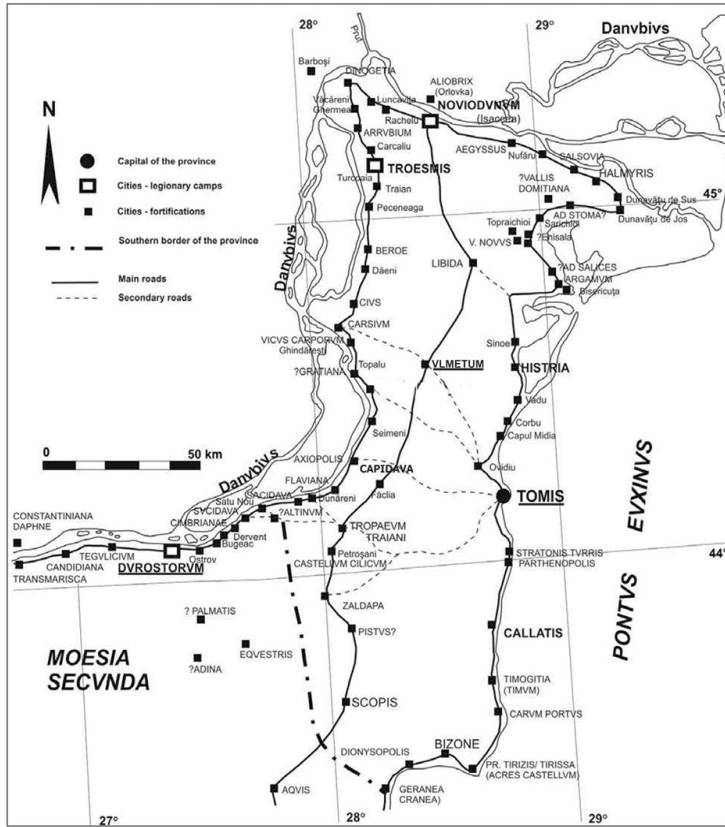


Figure 3. The major settlements in Roman Dobrogea and the location of Ulmetum and Durostorum (OPRIȘ & RAȚIU 2017)

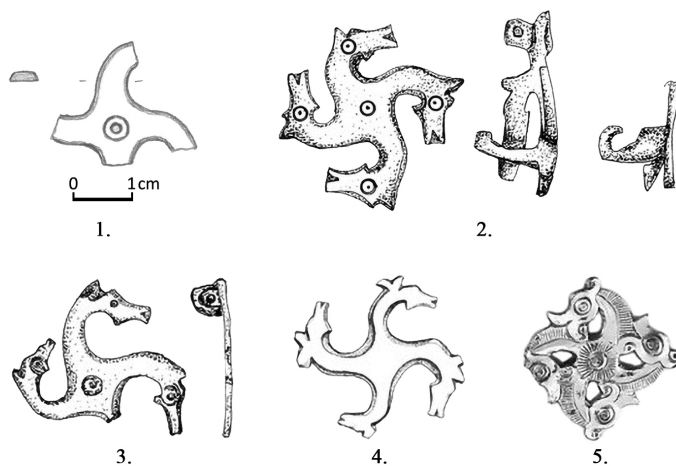


Figure 4. Swastika-shaped fibulae with horse-head decorations: 1 – Ulmetum; 2–4 – Durostorum; 5 – Silver braket from the princely tomb from Peretu, 4th cent. BC

those found on the territory of Bulgaria², respectively three pieces found in the civil settlement from "Ferma 4", near the military camp from *Durostorum*³, and one in the Late Roman fort at *Ulmetum* (Figure 3). We consider this study to be an absolute necessity for completing the spreading area of this type of fibulae. Their emergence in a less studied region from this point of view shows us the material culture uniformization that took place in the Roman provinces of the Lower Danube. The main factor of spreading the Roman culture was of course the military. This is reflected in the contexts in which the fibulae were discovered: the civil settlement beside the legionary camp of *Legio XI Claudia* from *Durostorum* and the *statio* from *Ulmetum*, strategically positioned at the intersection of several Roman roads in the centre of Dobroudja.

Spread area and typology

From a morphological point of view, the swastika-shaped fibulae with horse-head decorations combine two common motifs: swastika or solar symbols and animal representations that appear as horse heads, more or less schematically represented at the ends of the four arms⁴. Ideologically, both elements designate "movement", which could confirm Nicolae Gudea's theory, according to which these brooches are artistic expressions of a horse cult that was born from the impact that the cavalry had as a basic military unit, with the establishment of Illyrian cavalry corps⁵. Another opinion belongs to Serbian researcher Sofija Petković, who believes that the appearance of this type of fibulae is closely related to the recruitment of "barbarians", especially Sarmatians and Alans, among Roman cavalry units, as a result of reforms adopted in the early 3rd century AD⁶. The wide diffusion area of this type of fibulae is the result of a massive and constant movement of troops from the Balkan Peninsula during the reign of Emperor Maximinus Thrax (235–238 AD) and throughout the Tetrarchy period⁷. They are found in the provinces of *Dacia*, *Dardania*, *Pannonia Inferior*, *Moesia Superior*, *Moesia Inferior*, *Noricum*, in the North Pontic area (Chersonesos), as well as in Germany and Northern Italy (Figures 1-2).

² HARALAMBIEVA 2014, 33, Fig. 1

³ I would like to express my gratitude to Mr. Dan Elefterescu (MDJ Călărași) and Dr. George Nuțu (ICEM Tulcea) for giving me the available information (photographs, drawings and details of the contexts in which they were discovered) about the fibulae from Ferma 4 – Ostrov. The three fibulas are part of a much wider study which is currently in print: GEORGE NUȚU, DAN ELEFTERESCU, *The Brooches from Durostorum – Ostrov*, Iași, 2018; and also to Dr Constantin Băjenaru (MINA Constanța) and Mr Daniel Schmidt for helping and supporting me in my research.

⁴ BUORA 1992, 105.

⁵ GUDEA 2004, 191.

⁶ PETKOVIĆ 2010, 187; HARALAMBIEVA 2014, 34.

⁷ BUORA 2005, 117.

Typologically, horse head swastika fibulae fall within Roman provincial port-clips group – type Almgren 232, appearing for the first time in literature through a piece discovered in Romania, which is currently in the collection of the National Museum of Transylvanian History in Cluj-Napoca⁸. The fibulae body is flat and at arms endings are depicted horse heads with concentric circles engraved as eyes. The same pattern of concentric circles can also be found in the middle of the body. There are two examples known so far in the literature in which the tails of horses are also shown, one discovered in Italy at Udine⁹ and a second one in Bulgaria, at Ruse (the camp of *Sexaginta Prista*)¹⁰.

Regarding the manufacturing process, they were made by pouring bronze into moulds made of hard materials. The grip system is the type Cociş 16, where the port-clip is hook-shaped¹¹.

The iconographic motif of the horse head that starts from the same body as well as the spreading area of most discoveries, namely the Danubian provinces *Pannonia Inferior*, *Dacia*, *Moesia Superior* and *Moesia Inferior*, denotes a Balkan origin¹². The Almgren 232 type is very similar to the Thracian and Scythian items from Late Hallstatt¹³. Brackets with the same representation were discovered in Thraco-Getic princely graves from the 4th century BC, such as the examples from Peretu¹⁴ or Agighiol¹⁵, both in Romania (Figure 4/5). Besides, the horse motif is very well known in Antiquity, being artistically represented in various forms since the Iron Age until the late Middle Ages, and being an important symbol of nomadic steppe tribes.

The high concentration of items found in Novi Banovci, the ancient *Burgenae*, and their spreading in the neighbouring territories justifies the hypothesis of the presence of a production workshop for horse head swastika fibulae in the Serbian settlement on the Danube bank¹⁶.

In Dacia several such fibulae are known, divided by S. Cociş into two types, 33b1 and 33b2¹⁷, mostly found in military contexts such as the camps from *Apulum*¹⁸, *Porolisum*,

⁸ ALMGREN 1923, 104 and Tafel X, 232.

⁹ BUORA 2005, 120, Tav. III/31.

¹⁰ TODOROVA 2013, 66, pl. II/6.

¹¹ COCIŞ 2004, 31, and pl. CLXX, fig. 16 from page 424.

¹² BUORA 1992, 105.

¹³ REDŽIĆ 2007, 51.

¹⁴ For brackets from the princely tomb from Peretu see MOSCALU 1986, 62, fig. 4; BUORA 1992, pl. 2, figs. 1 and 2; TROHANI 2013, 266, 52.4–52.6.

¹⁵ For the inventory tomb from Agighiol see BERCIU 1969, 169–187.

¹⁶ BUORA 1992, 105; PETKOVIĆ 2010, 187; KOSTROMICHYOV 2012, 69.

¹⁷ One is published by ALMGREN 1923 – 232, and the other eight by COCIŞ 2004, type 33b1 and 33b2, cat. no.: 1631–1638.

¹⁸ BOUNEGRU *et al.*, 2011, 126, cat. no. 257.

*Potaissa*¹⁹, Micia, Cristești, etc. Several brooches, including a silver one, were discovered in the camps from the Danube line, in Banat region²⁰. Although there is a rather high number of finds in this area, the author assumes that in the province there was no local production centre, the pieces being imports from other areas of the empire, most likely coming from the southern branch of Pannonia Inferior, where the above mentioned settlement, *Burgenae*²¹, was located.

Chronology

Because of the uncertain circumstances in which these archaeological pieces were discovered, in many cases, their dating has never been an easy task. Considering the specific environments like camps or strategic points at crossroads, such as the *Ulmetum* station, those who wore them were mainly soldiers²². For *Dacia*, N. Gudea suggests a chronologic classification in the first half of the 3rd century AD, having as a *terminus post quem* the abandonment of the province (year 275 AD), believing that after the withdrawal of the administration and the army their existence ceases²³. However, S. Cociș believes that they have a longer period of evolution, from the 3rd to the 4th centuries AD²⁴. On the territory of Serbia, this type (Petković 23D) is dated also throughout the 3rd–4th centuries AD, based on discoveries made in the graves in the necropolis of *Viminacium*. However, the author notes that they can be found in disturbed stratigraphic contexts from the 2nd century AD until the early 5th century AD²⁵. Also, for Bulgaria, E. Genčeva frames the Almgren 232 type (Genčeva 32b) throughout the 4th century AD, and notes that fibulae are found also within the province of *Moesia*, not necessarily only in the area of the *limes*²⁶.

The context of the findings

The fibula from *Ulmetum* (Almgren 232, Cociș 33b2), was discovered in 2009 during systematic investigations carried out in the fort, near the Early Christian basilica, in the gravel pavement of a street dated in the 5th century AD. After its state of poor preservation, having broken the swastika arms and after traces of damage, it can be concluded that it was found in a secondary

¹⁹ NEMETI 2017, pl. XXVIII/4.

²⁰ The brooches are not published. This information was given to us by the courtesy of Dr. Ana Hamat from Muzeul Banatului Montan, Reșița.

²¹ COCIȘ 2004, 135.

²² COCIȘ 2004, 135.

²³ GUDEA 2004, 189–191.

²⁴ COCIȘ 2004, 135.

²⁵ PETKOVIĆ 2010, 187.

²⁶ GENČEVA 2004, 122; TODOROVA 2013, 58.

archaeological context, being carried from the levels of previous habitation to the street. Although the stratigraphic situation is not clear, we can date the piece to the 3rd–4th centuries AD, and put it in relation with the functioning of the Roman road station that existed in *Ulmetum* before the construction of the late fortress. According to the latest archaeological researches and the discovery of some lead seals and pieces of military equipment, which are clearly dated earlier than the fortification system, with the necessary reserves, we date the functioning of the statio in the 3rd and 4th centuries AD.

Of course, the issue of dating remains open, waiting for discoveries in a much more clear chronological context. The closest analogies for the piece from Pantelimonu de Sus come from the provinces *Moesia Superior*, in the camp of the *Legio IV Flavia Felix*, *Singidunum*²⁷ and from *Moesia Inferior*, discovered in uncertain conditions, currently part of the Ruse Regional Museum collection²⁸.

The three brooches from Ostrov – Ferma 4 were unfortunately discovered on the Danube shore, stray finds on the beach, without a clear archaeological context that could help date them. Thus, we consider their chronological framing according to the evolution of the *vicus* developed here in the 2nd–3rd centuries AD. Starting with the second Dacian war from 105–106 A.D., when *Legio XI Claudia* was detached at *Durostorum* during Emperor Trajan's reign, the civil settlements developed near the camp begin to flourish²⁹. The two main civil centers found in the proximity of the legion headquarters were the *canabae* (identified northeast, north and northwest of the camp, covering an area of 25–30 ha³⁰) and the *vicus* mentioned above. This *vicus* covers an area of 24 ha, and is located between the Constanța – Călărași national road and the bank of the Danube. The discovery of a substantial collection of artifacts and archaeological vestiges, during surface surveys and systematic investigations, and a *spolia* which mentions the name *Municipium Aurelium Durostorum*, led to the hypothesis embraced by many scholars that this *vicus* and not the *canabae* developed into a *municipium*³¹.

In a recent study by the Bulgarian researcher I. Boyanov, the author proposes a new theory, by identifying the settlement with *vicus* Gavidina, mentioned on epigraphic monuments and in ancient written sources. In his opinion, the *canabae* from the vicinity of the camp was promoted to the rank of *municipium*, and not the *vicus* from Ostrov, Romania. Thus, the *vicus* took over the functions of the *canabae* after it developed into a *municipium*. From this point forward, the *vicus* became a very prosper artisan center, inhabited also by veterans from the Roman legion³². The archaeological research conducted here in the last

²⁷ BUORA 2005, Tav. II/18–21; PETKOVIĆ 2010, T. XXXIV/2.

²⁸ TODOROVA 2013, 66, Pl. II/6.

²⁹ DAMIAN, BÂLTÂC 2007, 62–63.

³⁰ BOYANOV 2010, 53.

³¹ DONEVSKI 2009, 109–110.

³² BOYANOV 2010, 57.

decades have brought to light an important settlement, dated in the 2nd–4th centuries A.D., which was in very close connection with the legionary camp of the eleventh legion³³. Among the discoveries which illustrate the prosperity of the settlement, we can include here the engraved stones or the gems, a clear indicator of richness, multiculturalism and polytheism³⁴.

Catalogue

1. Place of discovery, context: Ulmetum 2009, square H 46, depth -0,70 m, in the gravel pavement of an ancient street (Figure 4/1).

Place of preservation: MINAC, Inv. Nr. 47630.

Conservation status: Fragmented.

Technical-Material-Description: Mould cast, bronze with a lot of lead, possibly gilded. Copper 66,8%, lead 28%, tin 4,8%, traces of Gold; fibulae body is flat. All four arms are broken. It has two concentric circles in the middle of the body.

Dimensions: L. 25 mm; l. 21 mm.

Dating: the 3rd–4th centuries AD.

Bibliography: Unpublished

2. Place of discovery, context: Ferma 4-Ostrov 1975. Stray find on the beach. Field survey by Dan Elefterescu (Figure 4/2).

Place of preservation: MDJC, inv. 15144.

Conservation status: Missing the pin. Slightly deformed.

Technical-Material-Description: Horse's eyes are represented by a circle and dot. The same type of ornament also appears in the middle of the brooch. Decoration obtained by casting. The horizontal catch plate has a rounded end and a very wide cut hook.

Dimensions: L. 40 mm; l. 13.4 mm.

Dating: 2nd–3rd century AD.

Bibliography: NUȚU, ELEFTERESCU 2018, cat. no. 90.

3. Durostorum-Ostrov 1984. Stray find on the beach. Field survey by Dan Elefterescu (Figure 4/3).

Place of preservation: MDJC, inv. 15120.

Conservation status: One arm and the pin are missing. One of the arms is slightly deformed.

Technical-Material-Description: Eyes are represented by a circle and dot. The same type of decoration also appears in the middle of the brooch. Hinge system. Gold colour, specific to bronze.

Dimensions: L. 40; l. of the long arms 33 mm.

Dating: 2nd–3rd century AD.

Bibliography: NUȚU, ELEFTERESCU 2018, cat. no. 91.

³³ DAMIAN, BÂLTĂC 2007, 67.

³⁴ MUȘETEANU, ELEFTERESCU 1976, 199–201; DEAC, PETCU 2017, 7–14.

4. Durostorum-Ostrov. Stray find on the beach (Figure 4/4).

Place of preservation: Private collection.

Conservation status: Missing the needle. Easily deformed. Very good conservation status. Steady brown-red patina.

Technical-Material-Description: Hinge system. It is mostly covered with brownish-red oxides.

Dimensions: L. 33 mm.

Dating: 2nd–3rd century AD.

Bibliography: NUȚU, ELEFTERESCU 2018, cat. no. 92

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