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AN AUCISSA DERIVATIVE FIBULA IN THE MIDDLE ROMAN PERIOD CEMETERIES IN ALBANIA: MILITARIA OR CIVIL TRENDS?

Abstract: This paper will take in consideration, a certain type of fibula a derivative of Aucissa. The Aucissa fibulae were very much in fashion during the I century BC-I century AD, but its variants continued to be in use in the forthcoming centuries, such as the typology in question, which represents the development of the Aucissa type in the II-III centuries AD.

This type has a limited number and distribution in Albania, presenting very close affiliation with counterparts in the Balkans, found mostly in military contexts. Most likely it represents an eastern Roman production, which attests regional patterns in the II-III centuries AD.

This typology can be correlated to the military sphere, as can be noticed from the associated material in the funerary contexts, demonstrating though for the militarization of the population or the presence of the roman units in the territory of Southern Illyria.

Keywords: *Albania, Fibula, Funerary, Military contexts.*

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INTRODUCTION

Fibulae are among the most studied small finds categories, since as clothing elements provide valuable information about fashion, influences, commerce, as well as the identity, gender and status of their holders. On these grounds, they have been the subject of in-depth studies in articles and corpus's in many countries, whereas in Albania are one of the less studied and published categories, besides some sporadically articles and/or brief notices in archaeological reports¹.

This paper deals with a certain type of fibula, a derivative of Aucissa, which had a limited distribution in Albania. These fibulae originate mainly from funerary contexts of II-IV centuries AD., but represent also sporadic finds in urban contexts and seem to find the closest analogies in the productions of the central Balkans.

The main intention of this contribution is to provide an overview of the typology of these fibulae and the status of their owners, by applying an integrated approach of the objects-based study and the revise of archeological contexts and associated material.

CONTEXTS OF FINDS

Unfortunately, most of these fibulae are sporadic finds and have not been found in closed or funerary contexts, which would have permitted a

¹ VESELI 2018, 237, note 2: with extended bibliography.

narrow dating, and further information related to other categories of material, contexts and usage. Although, the fibulae that will be revised, originate from funerary or possible funerary contexts, such as those from Burrel, Mirake, Gjoricaj and Zgerdhesh (Fig. 1).

The fibula of Burrel (Fig. 2/1) was found in a funerary context (inhumation, simple pit without construction) which inventory beside the fibula consisted of a knife, a machete, a sickle, a vase and a bead (Fig. 3)². The cemetery of Burrel located in the north of the country represents a tumulus in use during the prehistoric period and reused in roman and the medieval period³. The graves are characterized of a rich inventory. The inventories of the graves dated in the III-IV centuries AD consist mainly of pottery, arms and working tools.

Another fibula (Fig. 2/2) was found in Miraka near Elbasan in central Albania⁴. The fibula was found in association with other artifacts such as arms, working tools and pottery (Fig 4). It is assumed that these finds originate from a cemetery in Miraka which is positioned close to the itinerary of Via Egnatia⁵.

The other fibula (Fig. 2/3) was found in Gjoricaj, located in the north-eastern Albania, along the river Drini i Zi, positioned at the crossroads of the valley, a strategic setting that provided favorable conditions for living, protection and commerce⁶. The finds were sporadic, but it seems that belonged yet again to a cemetery of middle and late Roman period (Fig. 5).

Another similar fibula (Fig 2/4) originates from the excavation of the cemetery of the ancient city of Zgerdhesh, which is situated in the central part of Albania, near the modern city of Kruja and after some theories can be identified as the ancient city of Albanopolis. The city has known its prosperous periods during the III-II centuries BC, representing one of the most developed cities of the Illyrian hinterland, with very close connection to Dyrrachium due to its geographic proximity⁷. The city lost its importance during the Roman period and then was totally abandoned. The inventory of the small cemetery represents an interesting variety from pottery, to arms, fibulae and buckles⁸. The inventory of the grave 12 (cist grave, inhumation) consists of a fibula, a buckle, fragments of a belt and a knife (Fig. 6)⁹.

FIBULAE OF AUCISSA DERIVATIVE TYPE

The fibulae discovered in the above contexts, represent typological similarities, belonging thus to a derivative of Aucissa type. The fibulae of Aucissa type were a characteristic of Roman production dating from the I century BC until the end of the I century AD¹⁰. The center

of production was Southern and Southeastern Europe, but their map of distribution shows a very wide circulation in all the Roman Empire. In Albania, a country under the influence of the Roman world, the fibula Aucissa is a common find in different sites¹¹.

However, the Aucissa type underwent transformation in shape and dimensions with the passing of the centuries, resulting on different types of fibulae known as the derivatives of Aucissa¹².

The typology in question belongs to one of the derivatives of Aucissa type, which is characterized by a similar morphology with the classical Aucissa, but presents larger dimensions and different variations of the foot. The fibula morphology is characterized by a flat, ribbon-like semi circular bow that widens into a square section at the head, which finishes in a hinge (with two round bulb extensions) where the spring was inserted. The arch extended into a big trapezoidal foot ending in an elongated knob. The decor comprises incised lines, circles and additional geometrical figures. It can be noticed that this type has derived from the classic Aucissa, finding also affinities with earlier types of fibulae such as Alessia and also with later types such as *zangenfibeln* or *hrusica*, according to the trapezoidal foot.

This type of fibula has been attested in some of the middle Roman cemeteries, but also in urban contexts in Albania, showing close affiliation with counterparts in Moesia, Dacia and current Serbia¹³. Most likely we are dealing with Balkan productions which attest regional patterns in the second half of the II century until the end of the III century AD.

The only fibula (Fig. 2/4) that represents variations on the morphology of the body, in relation to the others exemplars, is the one that originates from Zgerdhesh. Its body extends in a triangular shape towards the trapezoidal foot where the pin was inserted, and its dimensions are bigger than the other fibulae¹⁴. Whereas, according to the other elements of morphology and decoration all the fibulae represent similar characteristics (Fig. 2).

CONTEXTS AND STATUS

The inventories of the funerary contexts of Burrel and Zgerdhesh indicate a military affiliation of the deceased. The fibula of Burrel was found in a funerary context which inventory consisted of arms, pottery and costume accessories (Fig. 3), demonstrating though the presence of a deceased with military connotation¹⁵. Also, the inventory of the grave 12 of Zgerdhesh (Fig. 6), especially, the fibula, the buckle, the

² KURTI 1977-1978, 179, Tab. VI, grave. 26:1.

³ KURTI 1977-1978, 157-187; VESELI 2020: for the reutilization of the tumulus and its significance in the roman and late antique period.

⁴ HASA/SHKODRA/VESELI 2017, 559.

⁵ The objects came to light by construction work, so the archaeological information is very scarce, but all the objects were preserved intact which suggest that the objects were part of funerary contexts.

⁶ BUNGURI 1992, 302, 306, fig. 3, 4, 5.

⁷ ISLAMI 1972, 196, 203-208.

⁸ KARAISKAJ 1977-78, 201-215; VESELI 2017.

⁹ KARAISKAJ 1977-78, 202-203, Tab. III; VESELI 2017, 534.

¹⁰ FEUGERE 1985, 312-330; COCIS 2004, 77-83, GENCEVA 2004, 104;

PETKOVIC 2010, 49-54; KROPOTOV 2010, 264-267, 272-273; BĂRCĂ 2011, 10-11.

¹¹ VESELI 2018, 245: Following the Roman invasion of southern Illyria and Epirus it can be noted that roman imports such as pottery, costume accessories and other type of material were present in these territories. In these categories can be inserted also the Roman fibulae as Aucissas, which replaced the Hellenistic types (lance head and *palmete* type), which testify for new identities and fashion in the country.

¹² FEUGERE 1985, 331-336; COCIS 2004, 83-84; PETKOVIC 2010, 60-70.

¹³ Type similar to BOJOVIC 1983, type III, var. 2; GENCEVA 2004, type 15; PETKOVIC 2010, type 9A and 10A

¹⁴ VESELI 2017, 534.

¹⁵ VESELI 2020: for a longer discussion about the status of the deceased regarding its inventory.

elements of the belt and the knife demonstrates again that we are dealing with parts of the costume and arms of a military official. Particularly, the belt of *Ringeschnallencingulum* type was a characteristic of the costume of the III century for the army officials as it is noticed by the depiction on military statues and military grave contexts¹⁶. Zgerdesh was a city mostly abandoned in the middle roman period and the presence of the necropolis inside the surrounding walls and its inventory can suggest for the presence of a small army unit, or part of the local population in service of the army, in order to control the roads from the coast to the hinterlands due to the strategic position of the ancient city¹⁷.

Furthermore, the fibulae of Miraka and Gjoricaj, which are sporadic finds most probably belonged to military funerary contexts, as they were found in association with knives, *dolabras*, machetes, spearheads and buckles (Fig. 4, 5)¹⁸. The site of Miraka is situated in central Albania where a series of *castrum* and road stations were constructed during the III-IV centuries AD., as a result of the political crisis of the Roman Empire, and in order to protect the road network from invasions of different barbarian tribes¹⁹. The material culture of Miraka may suggest for the presence of a small *castrum* or a road station even though architecture structures were not located. Gjoricaj located in north east Albania is also situated like Mirakaj in the traces of the old roads of Roman period where different small *castrums* were identified²⁰. The material culture which is very similar to that of Mirakaj may suggest for some military use of the site, which was discovered by agricultural work that might have probably destroyed the *insitu* structures of a probable site or a necropolis.

Thus, the different contexts by the typology of finds and locations might suggest that some of the individuals of the communities were part of the military service; or for the presence of small units of the imperial army placed in the main route axes or strategic points for its protections as elsewhere in the Roman Empire²¹.

It was common that during the middle Roman period the persons belonging to a military rank were buried with their costumes and accessories likes buckles, fibulae, arms, etc. This phenomenon was extremely important for officials in the periphery of the empire in order to define their special military status²². In fact, the fibulae very often were part of a military costume and some of them were recognized as military types. One of these fibulae was the Aucissa type and its derivatives, and indeed the typology in question is common in military camps in the Balkans, although, it is very difficult to define which types were only in use by the military and which by the civil population.

¹⁶ COULSTON 1987, 149; GUI 2015: for military statues wearing this type of belt and military inventory graves in Dacia; For this type of belt see also: OLDENSTEIN 1976, 218-219; SCHNURBEIN 1977, 87-88; SCHNURBEIN 1995, 145 and 147, is of the idea that this type of belt was used even from civilians.

¹⁷ ISLAMI 1972, 196-197; VESELI 2017, 538.

¹⁸ All the objects are preserved in very good condition.

¹⁹ CEKA 1972, 7-33.

²⁰ BUNGURI 1992, 301-312.

²¹ ALFÖLDY 1974, 91-111.

²² PETKOVIC 2011, 121-124.

CONCLUSIONS

The typology of this derivative of Aucissa finds the closest parallels with exemplars from central Balkans, which inclines us to believe that most probably their center of production was localized in the Balkans, around II-III centuries AD. The study of the archaeological evidence suggests for military affiliations since in most of the cases the fibulae were found with other types of *militaria* such as elements of the costume and arms.

It is difficult to confirm whether we are dealing with individuals of the local population in the service of the army or part of a Roman military unit placed in these sites, as the archaeological and historical data in most cases are limited.

The utilization of this category of Aucissa should be related to the new trends in the military costume²³, but we cannot totally deny the possibility that they were also in use by civilians, as was commonly the case for other military fibulae during the Roman Empire.

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- ²³ See above: Like the belt of *Ringeschnallencingulum* type which became a military fashion in the III century AD.

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Tab. I



Fig. 1. Map of Distribution.

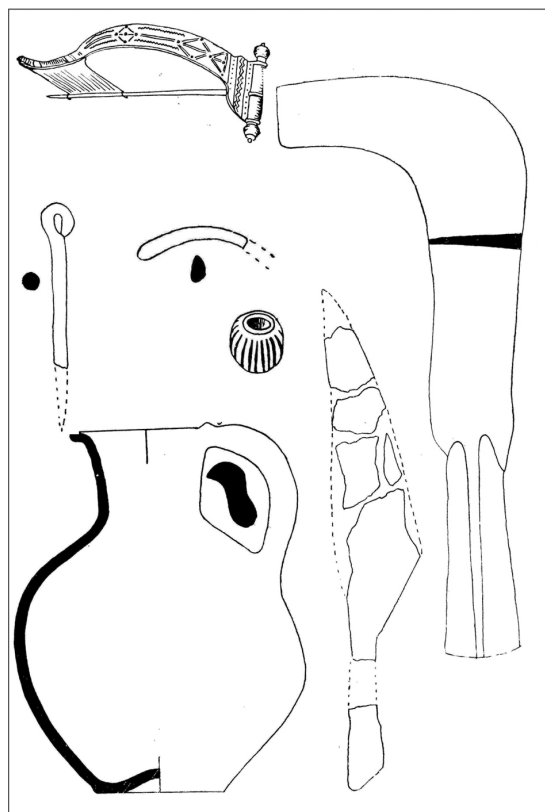


Fig. 3. Grave Burrel (after KURTI 1977-1978).

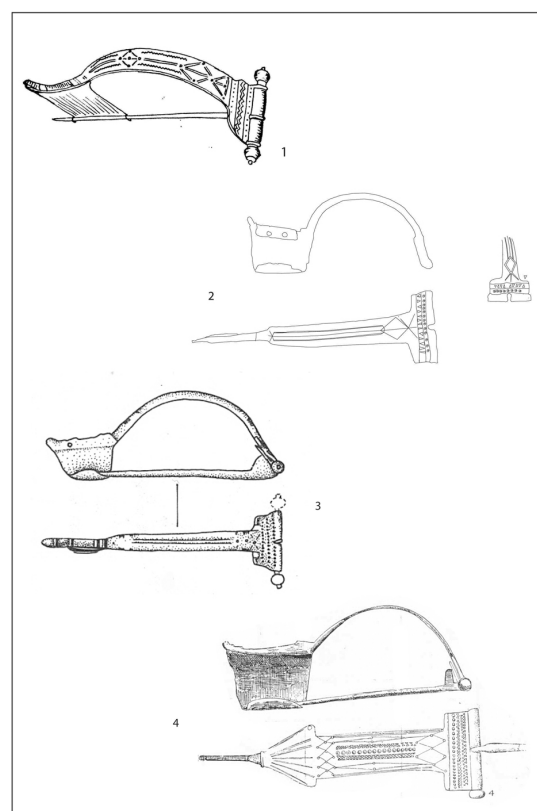


Fig. 2. Fibulae.

Tab. II



Fig. 4. Finds and fibula from Miraka.

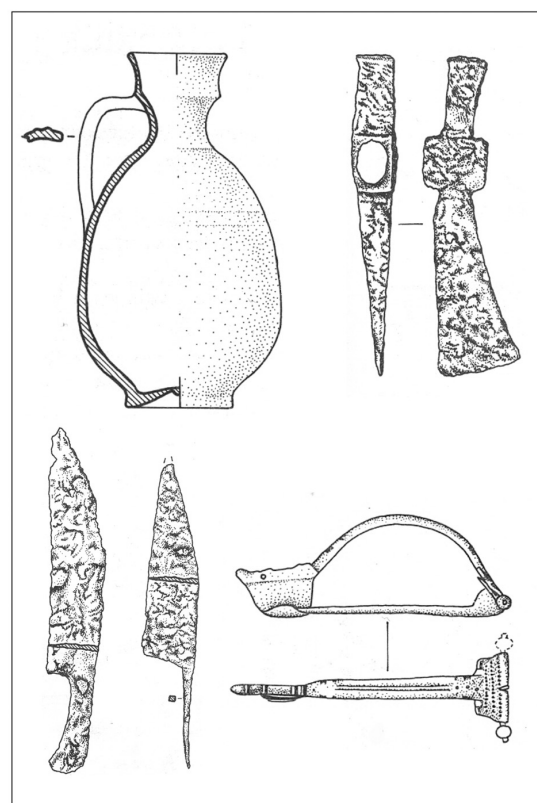


Fig. 5. Finds from Gjorica e Poshtme (after BUNGURI 1992).

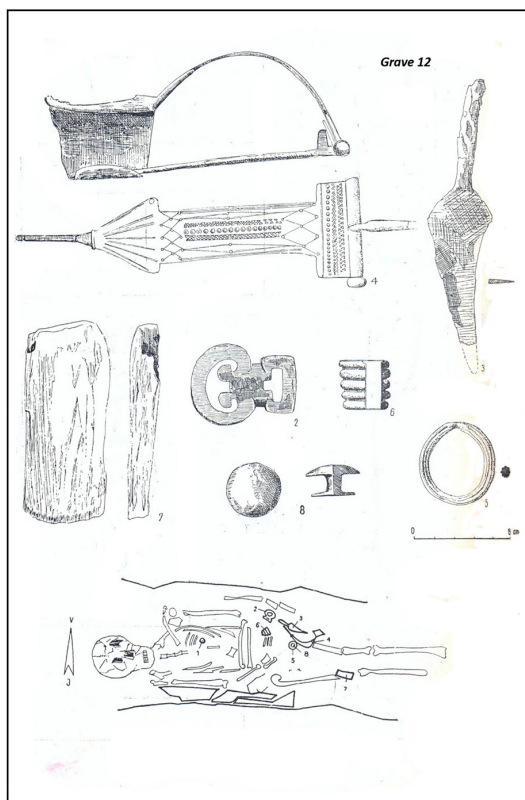


Fig. 6. Grave 12, Zgërdhesh (after KARAISKAJ 1977-1978).