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CONTENTS

STUDIES

ANCIENT HISTORY

Stanislav GRIGORIEV

METAL NAMES AND THE INDO-EUROPEAN HOMELAND 5

Mesut KINACI

PHARNACES I OF PONTUS AND THE EXPANSIONIST POLICY
ON THE BLACK SEA: *DYNASTIC AMBITION, MARITIME
STRATEGY, AND HELLENISTIC POWER POLITICS
IN THE SECOND CENTURY BC* 26

Dan DEAC

THE *PROCURATORES PRAESIDIALES* OF DACIA
POROLISSENSIS UNDER ANTONINUS PIUS
AND THE QUEST FOR THE *PRAETORIUM PROCURATORIS*
AT POROLISSUM 34

Fateme EBRAHIMPOUR

TRACING THE ROOTS OF A STRATEGIC MISTAKE
IN SASANIAN TRADE POLICY; A COMPARATIVE STUDY
OF THE APPROACHES OF SHAPUR I AND BAHRAM I
TOWARD PALMYRA 44

ARCHAEOLOGY

Oleksandr SYMONENKO, Olena DZNELADZE, Denys SIKOZA

LATE SCYTHIAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL CULTURE:
A THREATENED PART OF UKRAINIAN
CULTURAL HERITAGE 50

Vasile IARMULSCHI, Sergiu MATVEEV, Dieter QUAST

TEST EXCAVATIONS AT THE ROMAN-AGE NECROPOLIS
OF CAȘUNCA (FLOREȘTI DISTRICT,
REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA) 71

ARCHAEOLOGICAL MATERIAL

Mihai DUNCA

GROUND STONE TOOLS FROM MOȘNIȚA NOUĂ –
OBJECTIVE 4 SITE 81

Cristian Ioan POPA

THE BRONZE ARTEFACT FROM THE WIETENBERG
CEMETERY IN SIBIȘENI 98

Monica MĂRGĂRIT, Gruia FAZECAȘ, Florin GOGĂLTAN

BRONZE AGE DEER ANTLER PROCESSING WORKSHOP AT
SÂNTION – DEALUL MĂNĂSTIRII
(BIHOR COUNTY, ROMANIA) 106

Lidia GONZÁLEZ ESTRADA

PROTECTIVE AMULETS FOR CHILDREN:
VULNERABILITY AND CARE IN ROMAN HISPANIA 125

Erdal ÜNAL - Vildan CAN - H. Ertuğ ERGÜRER

A HOLY RIDER AMULET FROM SYEDRA 159

Sara RADOVIĆ

AN INSCRIBED EARLY BYZANTINE FIBULA FROM SERBIA:
SOME REMARKS ON THE CULT OF SAINT MENAS
IN THE BALKANS 166

ARCHAEOLOGICAL MATERIAL AND REPORTS

Manuela MĂIȚĂ MAXIM

EARLY ROMAN POTTERY (2ND –3RD CENTURIES AD)
DISCOVERED IN A BUILDING WITHIN A RURAL
SETTLEMENT IN THE TERRITORY OF TOMIS 178

EPIGRAPHY AND PAPYROLOGY

Antonio AGUILERA MARTÍN, Juan Manuel BERMÚDEZ LORENZO

TITULI PICTI BETA ON DRESSSEL 20 AMPHORAE
FROM THE COLLECTION OF EMILIO RODRÍGUEZ ALMEIDA
FROM MONTE TESTACCIO (ROME) 206

NUMISMATICS

Abdullah Yavuz AKINCI

AGONISTIC DEPICTIONS AND SPORTS CULTURE ON COINS
FROM THE CITIES OF PISIDIA DURING THE ROMAN
IMPERIAL PERIOD 214

HISTORIOGRAPHY

Gligor M. SAMARDŽIĆ, Lazar D. AKSENTIJEVIĆ

SERBIAN JOURNALS OF THE SECOND HALF OF THE 19TH
AND THE BEGINNING OF THE 20TH CENTURY ON THE
POSITION OF CHRISTIANS IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE 221

IN MEMORIAM

Mihaela GLIGOR

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF SOLITUDE:
IUDITA WINKLER (1925-1985) 229

REVIEWS

Vitalie BÂRCĂ

Denis Topal, Griffin Daggers of the Issyk Type and the Akinakai of Eastern Eurasia. [In Russian], Almaty: NITSIA Begazy-Tasmola, 2024, 224 p. ISBN 978-601-7106-96-6 250

Vitalie BÂRCĂ

Alin Henț, Rethinking the Late Iron Age Dacians. A Historiographical and Archaeological Perspective on Status Identities, Cluj-Napoca, Mega Publishing House, 2025, 259 p. ISBN 978-606-020-997-3 256

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ARCHAEOLOGICAL MATERIAL

AN INSCRIBED EARLY BYZANTINE FIBULA FROM SERBIA: SOME REMARKS ON THE CULT OF SAINT MENAS IN THE BALKANS

Abstract: A fragmentary bronze fibula with the inscription MINNA was uncovered at the archaeological site of Kladenčište near Bela Palanka, Serbia. Based on its archaeological context and comparisons with similar finds—characterized by a backward-bent foot resembling the Latin letter U and featuring inscriptions on the foot, known exclusively from the Balkans—the Kladenčište fibula is dated to the 6th century CE. The inscription most likely refers to Saint Menas (also known as Minas, Mina, or Mena), an Egyptian martyr who was persecuted under Diocletian. Together with at least five other fibulae bearing Menas' name and the evidence of so-called Menas flasks, the Kladenčište fibula strengthens the case for the widespread veneration of St. Menas in the central and eastern Balkans during the Early Byzantine period.

Keywords: *fibulae, inscription, St. Menas, Christianity, Early Byzantine period, Serbia*

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INTRODUCTION

Rescue excavations conducted in 2013–2014 in advance of construction along the eastern branch of pan-European Corridor X in Serbia—on the Bancarevo–Crvena Reka section of the now-completed E-80 highway between Niš and the Bulgarian border—documented the multi-layered archaeological site of Kladenčište near the village of Špaj (Bela Palanka municipality, Pirot District, southeastern Serbia).¹ The site lies approximately ten kilometers northwest of ancient Remesiana (modern Bela Palanka; **Fig. 1**), an important episcopal center in Late Antiquity and the seat of St. Nicetas of Remesiana in the late 4th and early 5th centuries CE. Excavations at Kladenčište revealed evidence of prehistoric (Early Iron Age), Roman, Early Byzantine, and early medieval occupations, with the most significant discovery being an early Christian basilica complex. Measuring 48 × 23.3 m, the basilica has a simple plan with a single, spacious nave and a semicircular apse. The complex also includes a large atrium and a baptistery with a cruciform piscina in the western part (**Fig. 2**). A small necropolis of five burials along

¹ BLAGOJEVIĆ/DORĐEVIĆ 2017, 16. Rescue excavations at Kladenčište were carried out under the supervision of archaeologist Mirjana Blagojević from the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments of Serbia in Belgrade, with the results published in BLAGOJEVIĆ 2017, 158–199. In July 2015, due to ongoing highway construction, the Institute decided to backfill the site with sand (BLAGOJEVIĆ 2017, 194; see also RAJKOVAČA 2016, 291).

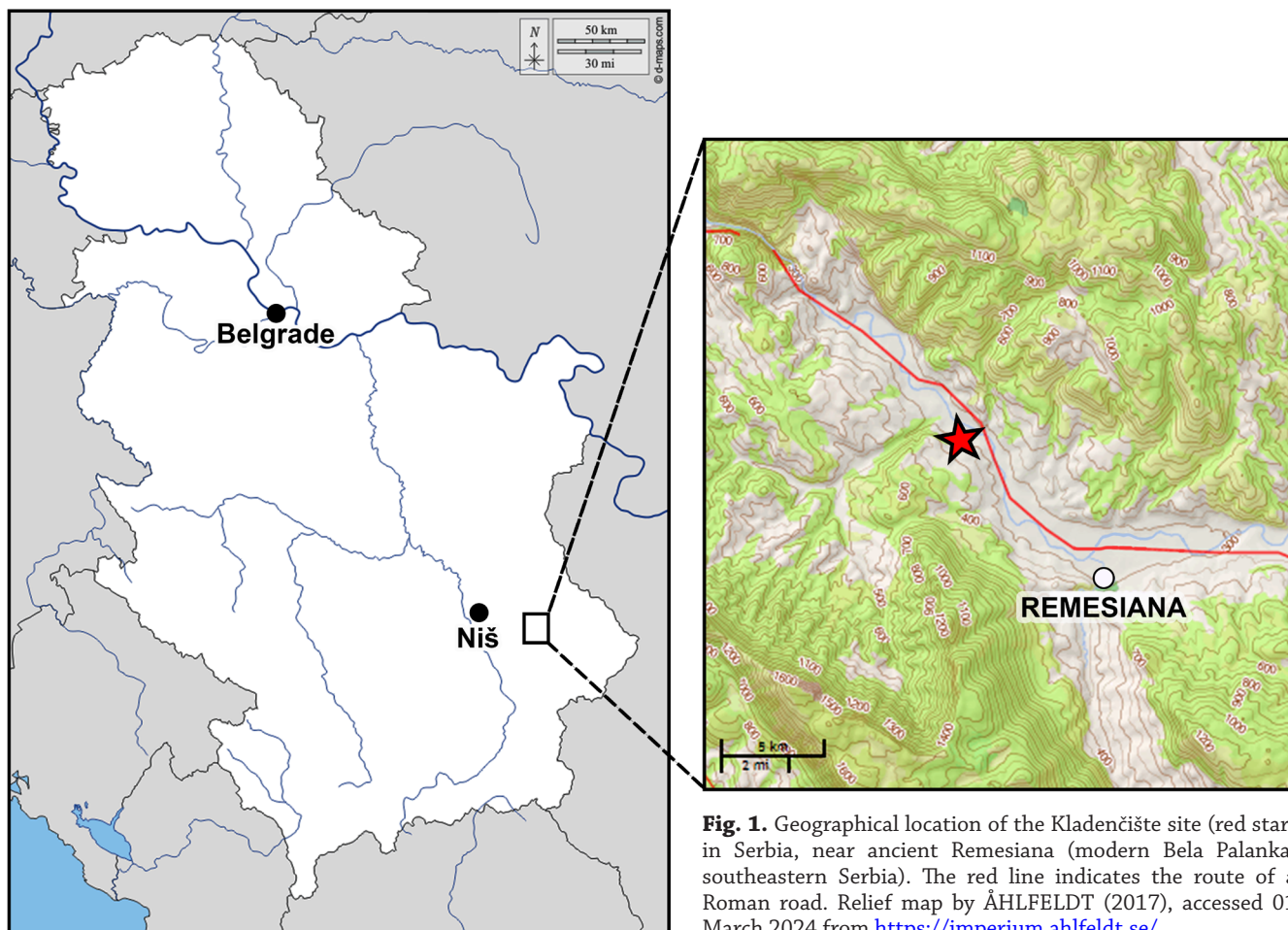


Fig. 2. An aerial photograph of the Basilica complex with the atrium in Kladenčište (Reproduced with permission from BLAGOJEVIĆ 2017, 164, fig. 2).

the southern exterior wall yielded no grave goods; however, nearby finds included Roman and Early Byzantine bronze coins, fragmented glass and ceramic vessels, fibulae, and jewelry. Based on the artifacts and architectural features, the complex can be dated to the 4th–6th centuries CE. Its high-quality construction, large scale, traces of fresco painting (in seco), and the presence of a baptistery suggest that the Kladenčište basilica may have been an important religious center along the Roman military road (via militaris) in the province of Dacia Mediterranea.²

One of the most intriguing finds from Kladenčište is a fragmented bronze bent-foot fibula recovered from the nave of the basilica during archaeological excavations. Among the five (bronze and iron) fibulae documented from the site and originally published by Blagojević,³ the fibula discussed in the present paper is of particular significance because it bears an inscription on the foot (Figs. 3 and 5/1).⁴ Although the

bow and pin are missing, the fibula preserves the backward-turned foot (32 × 13 × 0.8 mm) and two coils connecting the catchplate to the beginning of the bow. In the side view, the preserved foot resembles the Latin letter U. Incised lines run along both the top and bottom of the inscription. Considering other examples of inscribed fibulae, presumably from present-day Bulgaria as well as other Balkan regions (Figs. 4 and 5),⁵ it can be inferred that the missing bow of the Kladenčište fibula was likely highly arched,⁶ ribbon-like, and decorated with incised lines along its full length. The fibula is most plausibly dated to the Late Antique or Early Byzantine period, probably the 6th century CE. This conclusion is supported by comparisons with other inscribed fibulae of this type, which are most commonly dated to the late 5th or 6th century CE⁷ and, more rarely, to the final decades of the 6th and the beginning of the 7th century CE.⁸ Further evidence comes from the abundant archaeological material at Kladenčište, dating to the 4th–6th century CE. In particular, the youngest of four Early Byzantine coins—a follis struck in the 13th year of Justinian's reign (539/540 CE)⁹—may help constrain the fibula's date to the first half of the 6th century CE.

CLASSIFICATION

In a broader sense, the find can be classified as a bow-type backward-bent foot fibula, in which the foot is turned back toward the head and wraps around the bow.¹⁰ This type of fibula is well-attested from the 3rd to the 6th century across the central and eastern Balkans, notably in present-day Serbia and Bulgaria, as well as in adjacent regions such as modern Romania.¹¹ It is variously referred to in the literature as *Fibeln mit umgeschlagenem Fuß*,¹² fibulae with bent stem,¹³ with returned foot,¹⁴ or with back turned foot and coil,¹⁵ among similar terms in other languages.¹⁶ Sixth-century bent-foot fibulae differ from earlier 3rd–4th-century examples in both design—characterized by a U-shaped foot—and geographic provenance, being mostly produced within the Roman Empire, particularly in the Lower Danube region. Accordingly, some authors use alternative terms for these later brooches, such as *fibulae byzantines barbarisées*,¹⁷



Fig. 3. Fragment of a bronze fibula with inscription MINNA, from Kladenčište, Serbia (photography by Mirjana Blagojević, Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments of Serbia, Belgrade).

² BLAGOJEVIĆ 2017, 158, 160.

³ BLAGOJEVIĆ 2017, 180.

⁴ The fibula studied in this paper is permanently housed at the Museum of Ponišavlje in Pirot, Serbia.

⁵ See also HARALAMBIEVA 1998, 373, abb. 5; CURTA/GANDILĂ 2013, 146–147, figs. 2–3.

⁶ A highly arched bow is a constant feature of the backward-bent foot (TEODOR 1988, 198; BUSULADŽIĆ 2010, 111) and is also characteristic of other bow-type fibulae such as *Armbrustfibeln* or crossbow fibulae (PETKOVIĆ 2010, 229, 230, 259).

⁷ GENČEVA 2004, 56–57, 111; IRIMIA 2005, 251, 256; CURTA/GANDILĂ 2013, 108; NUȚU/TOPOLEANU/ANTON 2014, 285, 291.

⁸ KOIČEVA/HARALAMBIEVA 1993, 62.; cf. JANKOVIĆ 1981, 172, 221, after 585/586 CE.

⁹ BLAGOJEVIĆ 2017, 191.

¹⁰ For a general description of bent-foot fibulae see e.g., ALMGREN 1923, 71; TEODOR 1988, 198; PETKOVIĆ 2010, 16.

¹¹ BOJOVIĆ 1983, 71–72.

¹² UENZE 1992, 141–154.

¹³ CURTA/GANDILĂ 2013.

¹⁴ BUSULADŽIĆ 2010, 111–114.

¹⁵ ŠPEHAR 2010, 169.

¹⁶ This artifact type is predominantly discussed in publications written in Serbian and Bulgarian.

¹⁷ JANKOVIĆ 1981, 172, 221. Janković is likely mistaken in suggesting that Early Byzantine bent-foot fibulae with real coils represent a barbarized



Fig. 4. Map of the Balkans showing the localities that yielded MINNA fibulae (red stars) and other inscribed fibulae mentioned in the text (yellow inverted triangles): Kladenčište (1), Ryahovo (2), Stan (3), Dragoevo (4), Kirilovo (5), Taor (6), Argamum (7), Izvoarele (8), Shumen (9), Veselinovo (10), Batoševo (11), Plovdiv (12), and Philippi (13). Serbia, North Macedonia, and Bulgaria are shown in grey. Base map downloaded from: https://d-maps.com/carte.php?num_car=4980&lang=e

*Fibeln mit umgeschlagenem Fuß des "frühbyzantinischen" Typ,*¹⁸ Early Byzantine fibulae with the upturned foot,¹⁹ or *Fibeln mit umwickelten Fuß,*²⁰ emphasising that the bent foot is wrapped around the bow.

variant modeled on somewhat earlier Byzantine cast fibulae with a bent foot (see comment in UENZE 1992, 148–149. Current research indicates that bent-foot fibulae with real coils actually predate the cast versions (VESELIČIĆ 2009, 35; CURTA/GÂNDILĂ 2013, 104), with cast fibulae being produced in the second half of the 6th century CE (MĂGUREANU 2008, 99, 115) or even during the last two to three decades of the century (CURTA/GÂNDILĂ 2011, 67).

¹⁸ PETKOVIĆ 2010, 368.

¹⁹ RAŠKOVIĆ/GAVRIĆ 2014, 14.

²⁰ NUŢU/TOPOLEANU/ANTON 2014, 288.

Various classifications of bent-foot fibulae have been proposed, typically restricted to specific periods or regions.²¹ However, some classifications are particularly relevant to the present study.²² According to Uenze's comprehensive system, the inscribed fibula from Kladenčište would be classified among *Bronzefibeln mit Spiralhaken* (i.e., bronze fibulae with spiral hooks).²³ Since Uenze's publication, the number of known examples has increased significantly, revealing numerous variations within this type and prompting more detailed categorizations. A notable recent

²¹ e.g., DIACONU 1971, 240–253; PEŠKAŘ 1972, 108–117; TEODOR 1988, 198–202; PETKOVIĆ 2010, 309–322.

²² UENZE 1992, 146–154; GENČEVA 2004, 51–59; CURTA/GÂNDILĂ 2013.

²³ UENZE 1992, 150–151.

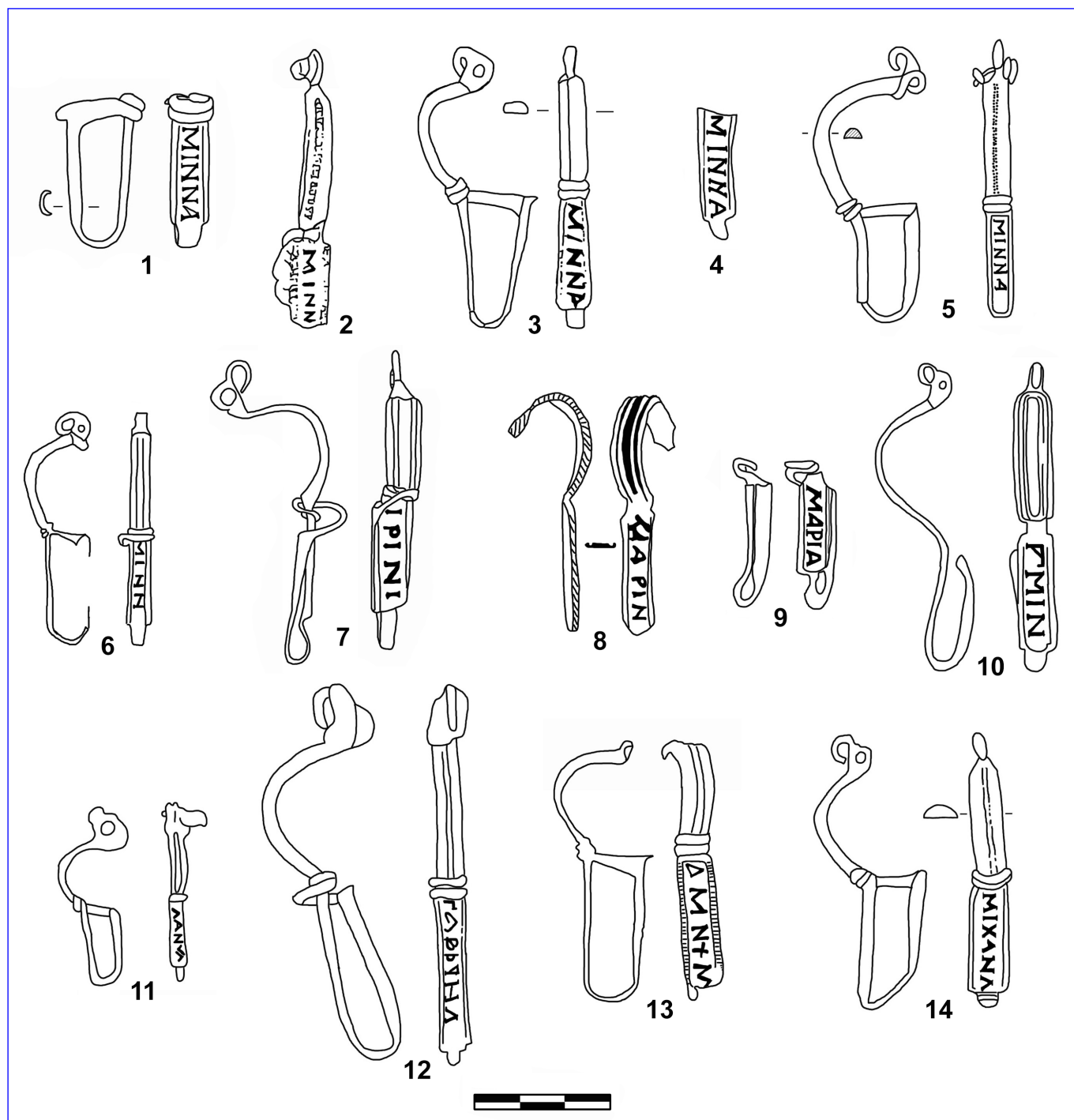


Fig. 5. Fibulae with inscription on foot: Kladenčište (1), Ryahovo (2), Stan (3), Dragoevo (4), Kirilovo (5), Taor (6), Argamum (7), Izvoarele (8), Shumen (9), Veselinovo (10), Batoshevo (11), Plovdiv (12), Philippi (13), and an unknown location in Bulgaria. Redrawn after: BLAGOJEVIĆ 2017, 182, tab. 6/1 (1); CURTA/GÂNDILĂ 2013, 147, fig. 3/2 (2), 147, fig. 3/4 (3), 146, fig. 2/10 (5), 147, fig. 3/3 (6), 146, fig. 2/9 (8), 146, fig. 2/11 (12), 147, fig. 3/6 (14); HARALAMBIEVA 1998, 373, abb. 5/4 (4), abb. 5/3 (9), abb. 5/6 (10), abb. 5/2 (11); NUȚU/TOPOLEANU/ANTON 2014, 293, taf. 1/3 (7); SÈVE 1981, 919, fig. 3 (13). Scale bar: 3 cm.

contribution is Curta and Gândilă's typology of 6th-century bent-foot fibulae, which recognizes 12 types; based on this classification, the Kladenčište specimen belongs to Class 2, i.e., fibulae with inscriptions on the stems.²⁴ Genčeva's typology is also pertinent, with the Kladenčište fibula assignable to her type 20a (*Fibeln mit umgeschlagenem Fuss tardives*).²⁵

²⁴ CURTA/GÂNDILĂ 2013, 107–108.

²⁵ GENČEVA 2004, 56–57, 111.

PRODUCTION OF BENT-FOOT FIBULAE

The origin of bent-foot fibulae has long been debated.²⁶ They are generally thought to have first appeared in the 1st century CE as descendants of Middle La Tène fibulae, likely produced in workshops along the northern coast of the Black Sea, from where they spread to central and northern

²⁶ See ALMGREN 1923, 71–74; DIACONU 1971, 239; PEŠKAŘ 1972, 108–117.

Europe.²⁷ These fibulae were further developed locally, acquiring new typological features.²⁸ At the same time, new forms emerged in Eastern Europe, some of which were associated with the Sântana de Mureș–Chernyakhov culture, which flourished between the 2nd and 5th centuries CE.²⁹ These types subsequently spread among the Dacians and other groups on the left bank of the Danube before reaching the Roman provinces across the river in the 3rd century CE.³⁰ Bent-foot fibulae documented at Balkan sites from the 3rd to 5th centuries CE include both barbarian imports and Roman products manufactured in the Lower Danubian provinces, notably in Roman Dacia at Porolissum and in Dacia Ripensis at Felix Romuliana.³¹ Despite their later Roman production, these fibulae are generally considered of *barbarian origin*.³²

Early Byzantine fibulae with a U-shaped bent foot were primarily produced in the 6th century CE within the Roman Empire, most likely in the Lower Danube region (present-day northern Bulgaria and eastern Serbia), where the largest concentrations of these fibulae have been found.³³ Fewer examples occur north of the Danube, suggesting that such fibulae were either imported into the *barbaricum* or locally imitated. Curta and Gândilă consider this fibula “an essentially sixth-century fashion phenomenon”³⁴ and “a thoroughly Roman product”,³⁵ viewing it as distinct from the Chernyakhov bent-foot fibulae. They argue that no securely dated 5th-century examples exist, implying a lack of continuity from the Chernyakhov tradition.³⁶ This view contrasts with Syna Uenze’s hypothesis, which proposes an evolutionary development of bent-stem fibulae from the 4th to the 6th century CE.³⁷ Indeed, as many specimens lack secure archaeological contexts, the possibility that some may date to the 5th century CE cannot be entirely ruled out. This possibility is further substantiated by the evidence presented by Sofija Petković, who identifies a type she labels 36/C—characterized by a bow narrowing toward the backward-bent foot and decorated with incised or impressed motifs—which was produced at Romuliana, likely during the first half of the 5th century CE.³⁸ A semi-finished example of this type was found in an ash layer dated to 441/443 CE, corroborating the chronology. Moreover, Petković suggests that Early Byzantine fibulae of the 6th century evolved directly from this 5th-century type, noting that it is precisely this form in which the Christian cross first appears in relief—a motif that

would later become a popular decorative element on fibulae in the Lower Danube region.³⁹ Consequently, the notion of a hiatus in bent-foot fibulae during the 5th century CE should be approached with caution.

Curta and Gândilă also challenge Uenze’s view that the spread of these fibulae in the 6th-century Balkans reflects the barbarisation of the provinces.⁴⁰ They point out that many examples date to the latter half of the 6th century CE, coinciding with Justinian’s reassertion of imperial authority in the region, which suggests a period of restoration rather than barbarisation. Furthermore, the authors point out that more fibulae of this type are found south of the Danube than in barbarian territories, supporting their Roman origin.⁴¹

Regarding Curta and Gândilă’s critique of Uenze’s evolutionary model, they appear to have slightly misinterpreted her position. Even Uenze acknowledges that the development from 4th- to 6th-century fibulae was not continuous. She also notes a reversal in the distribution of finds: by the 6th century CE, the pattern shifts in favor of the Balkan provinces, and certain Late Roman workshops began producing bent-foot fibulae.⁴² The key question, therefore, is not whether these fibulae were products of the Empire, but rather which population was responsible for their manufacture. In this respect, Genčeva associates fibulae with a backward-bent foot with Gepidic and, more broadly, barbarian contexts, noting their occurrence in so-called Gepid graves in the Balkans and interpreting them as part of a Germanic cultural tradition.⁴³ Uenze suggests that the flourishing of this fibula fashion in the 6th century CE could potentially reflect the gradual barbarisation of the Balkan provinces, while emphasizing that only the early 4th- and 5th-century fibulae can be reliably identified as East Germanic costume accessories.⁴⁴ Curta and Gândilă dismiss the notion of barbarisation too readily, arguing that the fibulae chronologically align with the restoration of Roman authority. Yet, the re-establishment of imperial control does not preclude ongoing barbarisation. Between the 4th and 6th centuries CE, the ethnic composition of the Balkans underwent profound change, with the decline of Romanized and indigenous populations and their integration with incoming groups such as Goths, Huns, and Sarmatians. This process produced a heavily barbarized provincial population, whose original ethnic identities were largely lost, as reflected in inscriptions and settlement patterns. Taken together, the evidence suggests that Chernyakhov fibulae likely served as a model or prototype for the subsequent development of Early Byzantine fibulae with a backward-bent foot resembling the letter U.⁴⁵

THE INSCRIPTION

³⁹ PETKOVIĆ 2010, 317, 321–322.

⁴⁰ CURTA/GÂNDILĂ 2013, 101, 103–104.

⁴¹ CURTA/GÂNDILĂ 2013, 104.

⁴² UENZE 1992, 158–159.

⁴³ GENČEVA 1989, 34.

⁴⁴ UENZE 1992, 159.

⁴⁵ IRIMIA 2005, 252–253.

²⁷ See PEŠKAŘ 1972, 109; BOJOVIĆ 1983, 71; GENČEVA 1989, 31; PETKOVIĆ 2010, 311; BUSULADŽIĆ 2010, 111. According to ALMGREN (1923, 72, 84), bent-foot fibulae originated at the earliest in the late 2nd century CE.

²⁸ See DIACONU 1971, 240–253; PETKOVIĆ 2010, 311; cf. GENČEVA 1989, 31.

²⁹ UENZE 1992, 141–142; PETKOVIĆ 2010, 22, 310.

³⁰ PETKOVIĆ 2010, 22, 341, 346.

³¹ PETKOVIĆ 2010, 22, 309–312, 315, 317, 341.

³² PETKOVIĆ 2010, 348.

³³ For the production in northern Bulgaria see GENČEVA 1989, 34; UENZE 1992, 150 (for iron bent-foot fibulae); cf. CURTA/GÂNDILĂ 2013, 132. For the region of Aquis (Prahovo in eastern Serbia) see JANKOVIĆ 1981, 172–174; cf. UENZE 1992, 148; CURTA/GÂNDILĂ 2013, 102–103.

³⁴ CURTA/GÂNDILĂ 2013, 101, cf. 130.

³⁵ CURTA/GÂNDILĂ 2013, 104; contra GENČEVA 1989, 34.

³⁶ Also see GENČEVA 1989, 34.

³⁷ CURTA/GÂNDILĂ 2013, 130–131.

³⁸ PETKOVIĆ 2010, 317.

The preserved foot of the fibula from Kladenčište bears a prominent inscription, readily transcribed as MINNA (**Fig. 3**). The characteristic letter forms—including distinct serifs in all letters, an M with vertical first and fourth downstrokes,⁴⁶ and an A with an upward-slanting crossbar—accord well with the proposed 6th century CE date of the fibula and closely parallel those documented in Christian Latin inscriptions from Naissus.⁴⁷ Following Curta and Gândilă, who discuss similar finds from the Balkans,⁴⁸ Blagojević interprets the inscription on the Kladenčište fibula as Latin.⁴⁹ The gemination of *n* also supports a Latin attribution, since this feature is attested only in Latin variants of the name.⁵⁰ Furthermore, the vast majority of epigraphic records from Remesiana and its vicinity are in Latin,⁵¹ which does not necessarily imply local production of the fibula. Interestingly, other inscriptions on fibulae from the Lower Danube provinces are consistently in Greek (see the discussion below), whereas the Minna fibulae appear to bear Latin inscriptions, which makes them stand out within this regional corpus. This discrepancy may be explained by the fact that the name itself represents a Latin transcription, while the letter forms are not exclusively tied to the Latin alphabet and could equally reflect Greek epigraphic practice. If this fibula originated from the same or related workshop as those bearing Greek inscriptions, it is possible that the language of the inscription was Greek, but that the name was rendered in its Latinised form; in a purely Greek version, one would expect the name with a single *n* rather than *Minna*.

With regard to the name Minna, it most plausibly refers to the Christian martyr Saint Menas (also Minas, Mina, Mena), who died in Phrygia at the end of the 3rd or the beginning of the 4th century CE and was subsequently buried in Egypt.⁵² While inscriptions on fibulae may, in some cases, denote the artisan, such signatures are typically executed on a smaller scale and placed in less conspicuous locations.⁵³ By contrast, the inscription MINNA on the Kladenčište fibula occupies the entire upper surface of the foot, which argues against its interpretation as a maker's mark⁵⁴ and favors a devotional or identificatory reading. Fibulae bearing the inscription MINNA have also been recorded in Bulgaria—at Dragoevo (Bulgarian: Драгоево),⁵⁵ Kirilovo (Кирилово),⁵⁶ and Stan (Стан)⁵⁷—within the former provinces of Moesia Secunda and Thrace. In addition, fibulae inscribed MINN[A] have been found at Taor (Macedonian: Таор) near Skopje,

North Macedonia, and at Ryahovo (Bulgarian: Ряхово) in northern Bulgaria, within the former provinces of Dardania and Scythia Minor, respectively.⁵⁸ As the Ryahovo fibula is broken toward the end of the foot, and since the example from Taor preserves only a partial inscription, both are most plausibly to be restored as MINNA. Other fibulae of this type bearing Greek inscriptions—ΜΑΡΙΑ (resolved as Μαρία, i.e., Maria), ΜΙΧΑΗΛ (Μιχαήλ, i.e., Michael), and ΓΑΒΡΑΗΛ (Γαβριήλ, i.e., Gabriel)—found at Shumen (Шумен), an unknown locality, and Plovdiv in Bulgaria, as well as fibulae inscribed AMIN (Veselinovo, Bulgaria) and AMN+M (Philippi, Greece),⁵⁹ indicate the Christian character of these artifacts.⁶⁰ Moreover, hagiographic tradition holds that the name of St. Menas forms an anagram of “Amen”,⁶¹ suggesting that the fibulae from Veselinovo and Philippi may likewise be connected to the cult of this saint. The association between “Amen” and “Mena” is additionally confirmed by ampullae inscribed “Blessing of St. Mena, Amen” (e.g., MNC 1926 from the Louvre Museum, Paris), underscoring this interpretative wordplay.⁶² Nevertheless, this interpretation remains hypothetical, as it lacks independent archaeological or contextual evidence.

Fibulae featuring Christian symbolism likewise include a specimen bearing the inscription IPINI (resolved as Ιπινι), which may be interpreted as a reference to the Christian concept of peace⁶³ or to the personal name. It was discovered at Argamum, Romania, and derives from a well-defined intra muros context in the vicinity of a basilica, suggesting an association with a Christian milieu and possibly with an individual belonging to the clergy or local administration.⁶⁴ A fragmented fibula bearing the inscription MAPIN was found at Izvoarele, southern Romania. Because neither the coils nor the lower part of the foot are preserved, its attribution to the backward-bent foot type can only be tentatively proposed.⁶⁵ According to Nuțu, Topoleanu, and Anton, this inscription cannot be regarded as Christian in character, but rather as a personal name, referring to either the owner or the craftsman.⁶⁶ However, the Christian character cannot be completely ruled out—at least two early Christian saints named Marinus are well-known: Saint Marinus, the 3rd–4th century hermit from Dalmatia, and Marinus of Caesarea,

⁴⁶ In early inscriptions from Upper Moesia, dating up to the 3rd century CE, the first and fourth strokes are typically rendered in a slanted position, see PETROVIĆ 1975, 115–116, 166.

⁴⁷ PETROVIĆ 1975, 110, 164–165, T. IX; also in IMS IV, 50–52.

⁴⁸ CURTA/GÂNDILĂ 2013.

⁴⁹ BLAGOJEVIĆ 2017, 180.

⁵⁰ For example: ILCV I, 2069, cf. AE 1896, 74; ILCV II, 03856; Salona IV, 265; CIL VII 1336.713. The gemination of the letter *n* is likewise attested in the toponymic derivative *Minnensis*, formed from the city of Mina in Mauretania Caesariensis, see *Notitia provinciarum et civitatum Africae* apud Vict. Vit. Hist. Persec. (Ed. HALM), 69.

⁵¹ See IMS IV.

⁵² HARALAMBIEVA 1998, 369; CURTA/GÂNDILĂ 2013, 107.

⁵³ HARALAMBIEVA 1998, 369.

⁵⁴ As suggested by GENČEVA 1989, 34.

⁵⁵ HARALAMBIEVA/ATANASOV 1992, 114.

⁵⁶ GENČEVA 1989, 33.

⁵⁷ HARALAMBIEVA 1989, 32.

⁵⁸ MIKULČÍK 1982, 103, 106; HARALAMBIEVA/IVANOV 1986, 12, 18.

⁵⁹ The inscribed fibula from Philippi, Greece, was first published by ŠEVE (1981, 919–920; fig. 3 on p. 919), who did not propose a reading of the inscription. CURTA/GÂNDILĂ (2013, 107) read the inscription as AMN+N; however, as shown in ŠEVE's illustration (1981, 919, fig. 3), the final letter may also be read as an M, given the inclination of the strokes and the possible presence of a fourth stroke at the end of the foot.

⁶⁰ CURTA/GÂNDILĂ 2013, 107, 146–147; HARALAMBIEVA 1998, 368–369, 373.

⁶¹ See Coptic Encomium in DRESCHER 1946, 43–44, 133, and Ehiopian texts in BUDGE 1909, 39–40, 45.

⁶² DAVIS 1998, 309.

⁶³ See NUȚU/TOPOLEANU/ANTON 2014, 289.

⁶⁴ See NUȚU/TOPOLEANU/ANTON 2014, 289. In the same city, a belt buckle inscribed with the name ΜΙΧΑΗΛ (COJA 1982) has also been discovered. In addition to the name, which may refer to the Archangel Michael (NUȚU/IACOB 2012, 28; NUȚU/TOPOLEANU/ANTON 2014, 289; contra COJA 1982, 172), it features explicitly Christian iconography in the form of a dove with a cross.

⁶⁵ IRIMIA 2005, 252.

⁶⁶ NUȚU/TOPOLEANU/ANTON 2014, 289. For the argument against the craftsman interpretation, see HARALAMBIEVA 1998, 369.

a 3rd-century Roman soldier and Christian martyr; other minor martyrs named Marin/Marinus also appear in Christian martyrologies.⁶⁷ Curta and Gândilă even raise the possibility that the inscription may have been misinterpreted and could instead refer to the Virgin Mary.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, it cannot be determined with certainty what exactly the inscription on the fibula refers to. In addition to fibulae bearing inscriptions that may be of Christian character, fibulae of the same or closely related types featuring a cross motif on the foot have also been discovered near Varna, Shumen, and Blagoevgrad (Благоевград) in Bulgaria; these are assigned to the same chronological horizon, namely the later 6th and early 7th century CE.⁶⁹

All the fibulae with inscriptions mentioned above are found south of the Danube (**Fig. 4**), indicating a coherent regional distribution pattern within the Balkan–Lower Danubian zone, likely reflecting a shared cultural and religious milieu within the Early Byzantine sphere. Given that most of these fibulae were recovered in present-day Bulgaria, it is plausible that local workshops that produced them existed in the region.⁷⁰

In the latter half of the 6th century CE, bent-foot fibulae with pseudo-coils and depictions of crosses and saints were also produced. There is good reason to assume that these fibulae were manufactured within the territory of modern Bulgaria, as unfinished examples have been recovered from several sites, including Prahovo (Прахово) in Serbia and Gabrovo (Габров) and Sadovec (Садовец) in Bulgaria.⁷¹ Although this variety differs from fibulae with real coils, their occurrence likewise indicates that Christian symbolism was a widespread decorative motif on bent-foot fibulae during this period. In this context, the name Minna is more plausibly interpreted as a reference to the saint rather than as the wearer's personal name.

POTENTIAL OWNERS

Since the fibula from Kladenčište was not recovered from a funerary context, no definite conclusions can be drawn regarding its owner. However, several hypotheses can be suggested. Within the hagiographic tradition, St. Menas was understood as a guardian of soldiers, enacting justice and protection through divine intervention.⁷² As a soldier in the Roman army, Menas was at times depicted in military attire, a representation that reflects his historical background and reinforces his identity as a martial figure. Although there is no firm evidence to substantiate Haralambieva's proposal⁷³ that settled soldiers—federates of the “middle class”⁷⁴—

were the typical wearers of fibulae bearing Christian inscriptions, the suggestion remains plausible. The fibulae in question are made of bronze rather than precious materials, which may indicate ownership by individuals of moderate social standing rather than elite patrons.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, in the absence of contextual archaeological data, such an attribution must remain hypothetical. Instead, available burial evidence indicates that bent-foot fibulae—including their various subtypes—were predominantly worn by women in the 6th century CE, with several examples also documented from children's graves.⁷⁶ Still, there is no reliable data on the social identities of individuals who wore fibulae with Christian inscriptions. Given that the fibula from Kladenčište was found within the basilica, it is also conceivable that such fibulae were worn by clergy; this possibility was previously suggested by Haralambieva in connection with fibulae bearing crosses and Christograms.⁷⁷

THE CULT OF ST. MENAS IN THE BALKANS

The cult of St. Menas gained prominence during Late Antiquity and the Early Byzantine period, extending its influence across the Mediterranean and beyond. It originated in 4th-century Egypt at Abu Mina, located about 50 km southwest of Alexandria. A church was erected at the presumed site of Menas' tomb in the early 5th century CE, which eventually became one of the Mediterranean's principal pilgrimage destinations. During the latter half of the 5th century CE, structures to accommodate pilgrims were added, including the Great Basilica adjacent to the church's eastern side. Under Justinian's reign, a larger church dedicated to St. Menas was constructed on the site of the earlier building.⁷⁸ Archaeological evidence indicates that pilgrims from across the Christian world visited Abu Mina, as shown by discoveries of ampullae—small clay vessels used to carry holy water or oil from the sanctuary—decorated with depictions of St. Menas, which have been found from England to northern Sudan and even as far as Central Asia.⁷⁹ In the Balkans, at least 16 ampullae depicting St. Menas have been documented.⁸⁰ Those found in the Lower Danube basin—specifically at Capidava, Orșova, and Constanța in Romania, as well as Pomorie (Bulgarian: Поморие) in Bulgaria—are dated to the late 6th and early 7th centuries CE, following the restoration of Byzantine rule in the region.⁸¹ Together with evidence from inscribed fibulae in Bulgaria, North Macedonia, and Serbia, these finds attest to the widespread veneration of St. Menas in the central and eastern Balkans during the Early Byzantine period.

⁶⁷ Only the fibula bearing the inscription LANA(Λαννα), or LAN and a star, discovered at Batoševo in Bulgaria, cannot be associated with a Christian milieu. KOIČEVA/HARALAMBIEVA (1993, 62) suggest a possible Jewish context.

⁶⁸ CURTA/GÂNDILĂ 2013, note 19, 107.

⁶⁹ HARALAMBIEVA 1998, 368, abb. 1.

⁷⁰ GENČEVA 1989, 34; cf. CURTA/GÂNDILĂ 2013, note 20, 132.

⁷¹ HARALAMBIEVA 1998, 368, abb. 2, 3.

⁷² DOROSZEWSKA/DOROSZEWSKI 2025.

⁷³ HARALAMBIEVA 1998, 369–370.

⁷⁴ Not military elite, as CURTA/GÂNDILĂ (2013, note 21, 107) interpret Haralambieva's text.

⁷⁵ Cf. the comment of HARALAMBIEVA 1998, 368, on bent-foot fibulae with Christian symbols.

⁷⁶ CURTA/GÂNDILĂ 2013, 101, 131, 174.

⁷⁷ HARALAMBIEVA 1998, 367; cf. NUȚU/TOPOLEANU/ANTON 2014, 289.

⁷⁸ For detailed discussions of the cult of St. Menas and the sanctuary at Abu Mina, see DRESCHER 1946, I–XXXII, GROSSMANN 1998, 281–302, and WIPSYZCKA 2025.

⁷⁹ DRESCHER 1946, XI; ANDERSON 2004; ANDERSON 2007; BANGERT 2006.

⁸⁰ ANDERSON 2007, 227–231.

⁸¹ ANDERSON 2007, 229.

Although ampullae depicting St. Menas have not been documented in the territory of present-day Serbia, other utilitarian objects may point to the presence of his cult in the region. The Belgrade City Museum curates an Early Christian lamp from Roman Singidunum (inventory number AC233) whose discus depicts two standing figures in the orans pose (male on the right, female on the left), with a cross between them.⁸² These figures were originally identified as the Roman Emperor Constantine the Great and his mother, Empress Helena,⁸³ an interpretation widely accepted by subsequent authors.⁸⁴ More recently, however, it has been suggested that the lamp may depict St. Menas and St. Thecla.⁸⁵ This pairing of St. Menas and St. Thecla is iconographically attested on two lamps curated at the National Archaeological Museum of Florence, Italy, and the Byzantine and Christian Museum in Athens, Greece—both likely produced in Antinoöpolis (Antinoë), Egypt—as well as on numerous examples of ampullae from Alexandria.⁸⁶ Plemić further observes that no depictions of Constantine and Helena in the orans pose are known on comparable objects featuring the True Cross, which lends additional support to identifying the figures on the Singidunum lamp as St. Menas and St. Thecla. On the other hand, lamps may have held particular ritual significance in the cult of St. Menas.⁸⁷ If the Singidunum lamp indeed depicts St. Menas and St. Thecla, this would constitute indirect evidence for the dissemination of the cult of St. Menas in the Central Balkans. In Late Antiquity, lamps fulfilled both practical and symbolic functions, being used in everyday contexts as well as in religious rituals—either as votive offerings or deposited unused in graves as part of funerary practice.⁸⁸ This dual role further strengthens their interpretative value as indicators of devotional practices.

An important indicator of the spread and popularity of the cult of St. Menas in the Balkans during the Early Byzantine period is found in Thessaloniki, Greece. The present Church of Saint Menas in Thessaloniki was erected in 1851–1852 on the remains of an earlier church, dated either to the turn of the 5th and 6th centuries CE⁸⁹ or more broadly to a pre-8th-century phase.⁹⁰ The post-Byzantine basilica incorporates the lower part of a semicircular apse, two capitals, an ambo, and several sculpted stone elements originating from the Early

Byzantine basilica.⁹¹ The existence of an Early Byzantine church dedicated to St. Menas is confirmed by Byzantine literary sources, most notably *The Life of Saint Gregory the Decapolite*,⁹² which records that St. Gregory resided in Thessaloniki for a time in 834 CE, lodging near the church of Hagios Menas.⁹³ The church was likely destroyed on multiple occasions, earning it the nickname “the Burned Monastery” during the Ottoman period.⁹⁴ In this light, Thessaloniki may be regarded as a potentially significant node within wider networks of cultic transmission, suggesting how the cult of St. Menas could have been received, localized, and sustained within the devotional geography of the Balkan provinces across Late Antiquity and the Early Byzantine period.

CONCLUSION

The fragmentary bent-foot fibula from Kladenčište, inscribed with the name Minna, represents a significant addition to the corpus of Early Byzantine artifacts in the central Balkans. Its typological features and archaeological context suggest a date in the first half of the 6th century CE and indicate connections to broader trends in bent-foot fibula production across the Lower Danube region. The inscription is most plausibly interpreted as a devotional reference to Saint Menas, highlighting the saint’s veneration beyond Egypt and into the Balkan provinces. While the precise social context of the Kladenčište fibula remains uncertain, its discovery within an early Christian basilica suggests it may have served a ritual or religious function, possibly associated with local clergy or lay worshippers of moderate social standing. The regional distribution of similar inscribed fibulae points to a shared cultural and religious milieu in which Christian symbols and the names of saints played an important role in everyday life and personal adornment. Taken together with evidence from other inscribed fibulae and other artifact types (e.g., ampullae), the Kladenčište find contributes to our understanding of how the cult of Saint Menas spread and adapted in the Balkans. This evidence enriches our understanding of Early Byzantine religiosity, revealing the interplay among local communities, material culture, and broader patterns of Christian veneration in southeastern Europe.

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⁸² See PLEMIĆ 2019, fig. 1.

⁸³ BIRTAŠEVIĆ 1955, 44–45.

⁸⁴ PETROVIĆ *et alii* 2005, 62; KUZMANOVIĆ-NOVOVIĆ 2009, 81.

⁸⁵ GUGOLJ/TEŠIĆ-RADOVANOVIĆ 2017; PLEMIĆ 2019.

⁸⁶ For the reference on the two lamps see GUGOLJ/TEŠIĆ-RADOVANOVIĆ 2017, 126–129, for ampullae see PLEMIĆ 2019, 756.

⁸⁷ According to the *Encomium of Saint Menas*, oil lamps figure prominently in the story of Menas’ conception: during the feast of the Holy Virgin, his previously barren mother dipped her finger into the oil of a burning lamp in the hope of conceiving, whereupon the infant Christ in Mary’s arms uttered the word “Amen,” and her wish was granted. When the child was born, she recalled the word she had heard and chose his name “Mena,” saying, “If we put the ‘a’ first, we have ‘Amen’; if we put it last, we have the name ‘Mena.’” (*Encomium* in DRESCHER 1946, 43–44, 133). The *Encomium* also records that an oil lamp was suspended in the sanctuary directly above the saint’s tomb and burned continuously (*Encomium* in DRESCHER 1946, 65, 144); the injured, the sick, and the afflicted received healing there (BUDGE 1909, 32–33, 57, 72).

⁸⁸ KUZMANOVIĆ-NOVOVIĆ 2013, 67.

⁸⁹ SZŁĄZAK 2018, 176–177.

⁹⁰ DALLAS 2015, 219.

⁹¹ SZŁĄZAK 2018, 177.

⁹² See DVORNIK 1926.

⁹³ MANGO 1985, 638; MANTOPOULOU-PANAGIOTOPOULOU 1996, 254.

⁹⁴ DALLAS 2015, 219.

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