

Inscribed Fibulae of Roman Soldiers in a Sienese Private Collection (Italy)*

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Abstract

Among the numerous metal objects purchased by a private collector from Siena (Italy) at the international antiques market many likely come from Roman military camps (armor, swords, rings, belts etc.). In this paper we will present some fibulae with short Latin inscriptions, perhaps belonged to soldiers or army officers. The texts are very concise and sometimes of difficult interpretation. These fibulae belong to these three types: Crossbow fibulae, Monogram fibulae and Openwork letters fibulae.

Keywords: Military fibulae, inscribed fibulae, crossbow fibulae, monogram fibulae, typology, military equipment, collection studies, Roman period, Middle Imperial Age, Late Roman period.

1. Introduction

In a private collection in Siena (Italy) there are personal ornaments and parts of armor from the Roman age, purchased on the international antiques market; among these objects there are also a large number of fibulae (fig. 1). Only some of them are inscribed and they can be perhaps traced back to the military sphere¹. It is possible that some of them are belonged to the clothing of Roman soldiers or officers and we would like to focus on these. Unfortunately, the discovery places of all of them are unknown, but comparisons with others could be made on the base of typology and iconography. Concerning to material, there are examples in copper, orichalcum, bronze and silver, but those in bronze prevail. Their measures go to a minimum of 2 to a maximum of 4 centimeters. [G.L.G.]

1. Uninscribed fibulae

Before dealing with the inscribed fibulae, we would like to briefly present the uninscribed fibulae, even if not all of them are surely attributable to the Roman castra along the Rhine-Danubian *limes*. They seem to belong to these four main types:

- Discoidal fibulae² (fig. 2): the first one has a riveted button in the center and two enamelled crowns, with checkerboard pattern; no decoration edge (figs 3a-3b); the second one belongs to the same type, but it has a third crown (figs 4a-b).
- Medallion fibulae (fig. 5)³: notched edge, in the center there is a silver circle, similar to a *phalera*, depicting the bust of a frontal male figure, perhaps Jupiter with a winged thunderbolt on his left side, how we can find on the reverse of some coins.
- Zoomorphic fibulae (fig. 6)⁴: decorated with different animals, like a wild boar, a rabbit, a horse, and a feline. Some legions had

animals as their emblem, such as the wild boar for the *Legio XX*⁵; it cannot be excluded that some of these fibulae had belonged to legionaries.

- Shoe-shaped fibulae (skeuomorphic) (fig. 7)⁶: this type is often enameled and decorated with small metal circles. These fibulae were discovered in the landscapes of Roman provinces and can be dated from the first or the second half of second century A.D. and the third century A.D.⁷. We know a one tipology surmounted by a ring, the most common, the one that hasn't it, and finally the one which has no trace of enamel and is sometimes provided with a protuberance reminiscent of the ring of the preceding type, but full⁸. In our specimen, there is an enamelled part and maybe, on the bottom of the fibula, there is a broken ring and on the upper part there are concentric elements along the edge and the central area of the bar; they remember the shoes used by Roman soldier called *caligae*. [D.C.]

Other fibulae, more likely of a military tipology, can be traced back to four different types:

- Fibula in the shape of a sword (fig. 8)⁹: represents a sheathed *gladius*; at the end there is a semi-circular knob, a very common feature for this type.
- Crested helmet-shaped fibula (fig. 9)¹⁰: the helmet could be the one of a horseman, with a high and vertical neck, a more or less wide oblique neck cover and a visor. Most probably it is attributable to the type of helmet called *Niederbieber*, datable between the second and the third century A.D., the presence of the crest may suggest that it is perhaps an helmet of a decurion of an *ala*.

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¹ Cfr. S. VESELI, in LAFLI *et alii* 2022, 60.

² SCHÖRLE 2018-2019, 206; and now T. POTĂRNICHE *et alii*, in LAFLI *et alii* 2022, 47.

³ RIHA 1979, 189-190.

⁴ GENCEVA 2004, 118-119.

⁵ GONZALEZ 2003, 392.

⁶ RIHA 1979, 203; and now B. STORCHAN, in LAFLI *et alii* 2022, 55.

⁷ RIHA 1994, 172.

⁸ FEUGÈRE 1985, 372-382.

⁹ SCHÖRLE 2018-2019, 205.

¹⁰ SCHÖRLE 2018-2019, 205.

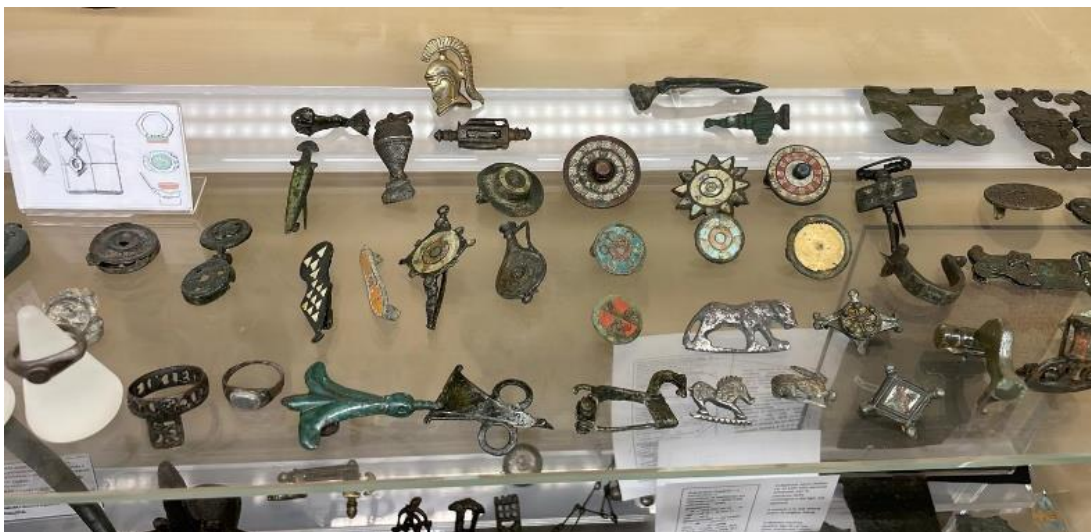


Figure 1. Siena, private collection: Fibulae of the Roman age



Figure 2. Siena, private collection: Discoidal fibulae



Figure 3. a-b Siena, private collection: Discoidal fibula with two enameled crowns.



Figure 4. a-b Siena, private collection: Discoidal fibula with a third crown



Figure 5. Siena, private collection: Medallion fibula



Figure 6. Siena, private collection: Zoomorphic fibulae



Figure 7. Siena, private collection: Shoe-shaped fibula (skeuomorphic)

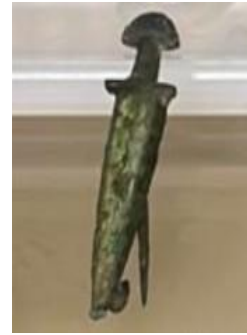


Figure 8. Siena, private collection: Fibula in the shape of a sword



Figure 9. Siena, private collection: Crested helmet-shaped fibula



Figure 10. Siena, private collection: Swastika fibula



Figure 11. Siena, private collection: Swastika fibula with zoomorphic protomes



Figure 12. Siena, private collection: "Omega" fibula

- Swastika fibulae (fig. 10)¹¹: some similar specimens have been found in the *castra* of *Novae* and *Dimum* in Bulgaria, datable between the second and the third century A.D. An eastern variant of this type shows, on the four terminals, zoomorphic protomes (fig. 11).
- So called "Omega" fibulae (fig. 12)¹²: this type is the most common in Britain, and it is rare in Gaul, Germany and Iberian Peninsula. Thinking about the discovery places, we can compare the shape of them with a *torques*, a collar used by celtic populations. The chronology of these fibulae is uncertain, because this type was widely used for a long time¹³. [M.G.]

2. Inscribed fibulae

The fibulae with inscription of this collection, someone connected to the military world, belong to the following three types:

- Crossbow fibulae¹⁴: this type is known in different variants. "We know that the first and the second centuries A.D. saw the emergence of a large number of shapes and types, this development came to a rather abrupt halt when, in the early decades of the third century, the crossbow fibulae become the dominant type"¹⁵.

In the Sienese collection there is an arched fibula with a square section and openwork letters (h. 0,5 cm) on it (*opus interrasile*)¹⁶. We read: "LEG XI CL P F" (which we can interpret as nominative or genitive) (fig. 13). The *Legio XI* in 42 A.D., on the occasion of the revolt of Lucius Arruntius Camillus Scribonianus against the emperor Claudius, remained faithful to the princeps and obtained the titles of *Claudia Pia Fidelis*. Similar inscriptions appear on brick stamps from Germania Superior, Pannonia Superior and Moesia Inferior, where over time this legion had its *castra*.

Another fibula of the same type, perhaps connectable to the military context and that can be considered a variant of the previous one, is a Latin Cross fibula that has on the arch this engraved inscription (letters h. cm 0,2): "HERCVLI" (fig. 14). The name could be considered a dative, interpreted as a dedication to Hercules, but since this fibula belong to the third or fourth century A.D., we cannot exclude that is a genitive of possession or a vocative, from the nominative *Herculius*. We know as comparison a gold fibula preserved in the Metropolitan Museum in New York¹⁷. The fibula could belong to an officer under the orders of *Maximianus Augustus Herculus*, colleague of Diocletian. But after the tetrarchical age, *Herculus*, like *Iovius*, was also used by ordinary people, legionaries or civilians.

In the Sienese collection there are also a fibula of this category with the engraved inscription "VTERE FELIX" (letters h. cm 0,5) (fig. 15), a good omen phrase, which is also found in other objects, not only military ones¹⁸. [F.M.]



Figure 13. Siena, private collection: Arched fibula with the text "LEG XI CL P F"

¹¹ GENCEVA 2004, 122; PETCU 2019.

¹² RIHA 1979, 177-179; and now R. ERICE LACABE, in LAFLI *et alii* 2022, 24.

¹³ GENCEVA 2004, 122.

¹⁴ RIHA 1979, 147-150; R. PETCU, in LAFLI *et alii* 2022, 45. On crossbow fibulae see now the hypotheses of C. CRAMATTE, quoted by CHRISTEN 2019.

¹⁵ DEPERT-LIPPITZ 2000.

¹⁶ For this fretwork technique: PACINI 2012; GIMENO PASCUAL 2012, 209 (this technique was widely used from the III cent. AD).

¹⁷ CIL XI 6711, 1; BEYELER 2011, n. 4; DEPERT-LIPPITZ 2000, 48: the inscription is located on both sides of the arch; in the first side the vocative "HERCVLI AVGVSTE", and on the opposite side "SEMPER VINCAS".

¹⁸ Other similar fibulae for instance in EDCS 00400, 00827, 00835, 01054 (unknown provenance, published in auction catalogs); cfr. RAYBOULD 1999, 140; FEUGÈRE 2022, 275. *Utere felix* is expression common also on rings; see GIMENO PASCUAL 2012, 208-209, 211-214 nn. 2-9 (figg. 1-2); KRIER 2017.



Figure 14. Siena, private collection: Latin cross fibula with the text "HERCVLI"



Figure 17. Siena, private collection: Openwork Letters Fibula with the text "MARS"



Figure 15. Siena, private collection: Crossbow fibula with the text "VTERE FELIX"

- Monogrammatic fibulae¹⁹: this type usually has a circular or quadrangular shape with intertwined letters inside (*opus interassile*). In the Sienese collection there are two specimens (fig. 16). The letters identifiable with certainty are R, M, A (letters h. cm 1,7/1,6), and the most immediate reading would be "ROMA"; other similar specimens, in silver or bronze, are known from the auction catalogs²⁰.
- Openwork Letters Fibulae²¹: this typology is characterized by a perforated structure (*opus interassile*), in which we could isolate more letters in connection with each other (h. cm 2,5/2,3) (fig. 17). The inscription could be interpreted as "MARS" or "MARTIS"²². The technique of using perforated letters is also found in other military ornaments, like belt decorations, and rings. [C.O.]

The study of these fibulae is only at the beginning; their dating is not always easy, above all for the lack of specimens from datable archaeological contexts. Furthermore it is not sure that all the fibulae are connected with soldiers, apart the "Kniefibel" (Fig. 13) and the Crossbows fibulae (Figs. 14 and 15). The others can be brooches, decorative objects also used by women; even the sword-shaped fibula is not necessarily a military ornament. We know that many civilians followed the armies and populated the canabae, adjacent to the Castra, which can lead to doubts in the interpretation of the objects from those contexts. For this reason prudence is more necessary than ever²³. [G.L.G.]



Figure 16. Siena, private collection: Monogrammatic fibulae with the text "PRIMA"

¹⁹ GENCEVA 2004, 121-122.

²⁰ For instance EDCS 00399, 00886, 00940, 00941, 00959, 00991, 00995, 01028, 01049, 01050, 01055, 01058, 01059, 01096, 01144, 01150, 01174, 01274, 01307.

²¹ RIHA 1994, 78.

²² Other specimens from Raetia (EDCS 01344) e from Pannonia superior (AE 2017, 1158).

²³ Cfr. FEUGÈRE 2018.

Résumé - Fibules inscrites de soldats romains dans un siennois
Collection privée (Italie) : Parmi les nombreux objets métalliques achetés par un collectionneur privé de Sienne (Italie) au salon international des antiquités beaucoup proviennent probablement des camps militaires romains (armures, épées, anneaux, ceintures, etc.). Dans cet article, nous allons présenter quelques fibules avec de courtes inscriptions latines, appartenant peut-être à des soldats ou à des officiers de l'armée. Les textes sont très concis et parfois d'interprétation difficile. Ces fibules appartiennent à ces trois types : fibules d'arbalète, fibules monogrammes et fibules lettres ajourées.
Mots-clés : *Fibules militaires, fibules inscrites, fibules d'arbalète, fibules monogrammes, typologie, équipement militaire, études de collections, période romaine, âge impérial moyen, période romaine tardive.*

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