

# The Byzantine Fibulae of Sardinia: A Survey

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## Abstract

The article provides an overall critique about the fibulae of Byzantine culture and provenance found in Sardinia. The current evidence includes 25 specimens of fibulae, found in 14 identifiable locations, while 3 finds are of unknown origin. The most attested fibulae are the disc-shaped ones, while there are fewer specimens with an arc and zoomorphic shape. Each type has individual specificities. The archaeological contextualization, where possible, leads to the identification of a majority presence of fibulas in female tombs, even if similar artifacts could also be the prerogative of the male dress. Their characteristics make them valuable artifacts and convincing evidence of the presence of high-ranking characters, using fibulae as a potential social value display.

**Keywords:** Byzantine fibulae; Sardinia; Metal artifacts; Byzantine Archaeology.

## 1. Introduction

Sardinia is the second-largest island of the Western Mediterranean. During Late Antiquity it was annexed to Byzantine Empire since 534, after the collapse of the Vandal Kingdom, of which it was a part. The island remained in the Byzantine sphere of influence at least until the ninth century, from which we have the first testimonies of the autonomous rulers - *iudikes*, *principes*, etc. - whose origin was one of the main features of the path the island undertook to shift from Byzantium to the Latin West [Metcalf, Fernández-Aceves, Muresu (eds) (2021)]. Before that happened, Sardinia experienced several levels of Byzantine cultural influence and appearance. Such a long journey can be detected - among other things - by the analysis of the archaeological markers. One of the latter are the fibulae, or brooches, one of the most important class of metal artifacts known in the island.

In Sardinia are known 24 specimens of fibulae, found in 14 identifiable locations, while 3 finds are of unknown origin<sup>1</sup> (fig. 1). Only 6 sites (equal to 37.5%) are characterized by stratigraphic reliability<sup>2</sup>, while the remaining (10, 62.5%) refer to fibulae discovered as a result of fortuitous finds, digging or archaeological investigations<sup>3</sup>. As for the contexts, the majority of the objects come from funerary areas<sup>4</sup> (10 locations, 58.8%), while the remaining locations (7, 41.1%) are indeterminable<sup>5</sup>.

Most of the fibulae are made of silver, which is used to make 40% of the set<sup>6</sup>; the remaining known metals are, in order of use, bronze and gold<sup>7</sup>, while individual specimens are made of copper and electro<sup>8</sup>. Morphologically speaking, the most attested fibulae are the disc-shaped ones<sup>9</sup>, while there are fewer specimens with an arc and

zoomorphic shape. Each type has individual specificities: the arched fibulae are mostly characterized by stirrup heads, while among the zoomorphic ones (only 3 specimens) there are objects in the form of an insect (a cicada or a bee, two specimens in silver and bronze respectively) and a dove (in bronze).



Figure 1. Late Antique Sardinia, list of places with findings of fibulae: 1. Porto Torres (Sassari, from now on SS), church of St. Gavino; 2. SS, Domus de Janas Giorre Verdi; 3. Borutta (SS), St. Pietro di Sorres; 4. Bortigali (Nuoro, from now on NU), Berre; 5. Teti (NU), Abini; 6.

<sup>1</sup> Identifiable locations: 1. Porto Torres (Sassari, from now on SS), church of St. Gavino; 2. SS, Domus de Janas Giorre Verdi; 3. Borutta (SS), St. Pietro di Sorres; 4. Bortigali (Nuoro, from now on NU), Berre; 5. Teti (NU), Abini; 6. Norbello (Oristano, from now on OR), St. Maria della Mercedes; 7. Cuglieri (OR), Cornus (Columbaris and Corchinas); 8. Nurachi (OR), St. Giovanni Battista; 9. Cabras (OR), St. Giorgio; 10. Nuragus (Sud Sardegna, from now on SU), nuraghe Santu Millanu; 11. Isili (SU); 12. Genuri (SU), nuraghe St. Marco; 13. Serri (SU), Sa Cungiadura Manna; 14. Dolianova-Serdiana (SU), Bruncu 'e s'Olia. Fibulae of unknown provenance: 15. Cagliari, Museo Archeologico Nazionale; 16. Sulcis-Iglesiente; 17. San Vito (SU).

<sup>2</sup> No. 1, 6, 7 (Columbaris), 8, 10, 12.

<sup>3</sup> No. 2-5, 7 (Corchinas), 9, 11, 13-14.

<sup>4</sup> No. 1-2, 4, 6, 7 (Columbaris), 8, 10, 13-14.

<sup>5</sup> No. 3, 5, 7 (Corchinas), 9, 11-12, 15-16.

<sup>6</sup> Locations no. 3 (no. 1 specimen), 6 (no. 1 s.), 7 (no. 3 s.), 8 (no. 1 s.), 9 (no. 1 s.), 10 (no. 1 s.), 13 (no. 1 s.), 16 (no. 1 s.).

<sup>7</sup> Gold: locations no. 4 (no. 2 specimens), 6 (no. 1 s.), 12 (no. 1 s.), 14 (no. 1 s.). Bronze: no. 2 (no. 1 s.), 3 (no. 2 s.), 5 (no. 1 s.), 7 (no. 2 s.), 9 (no. 1 s.), 11 (no. 1 s.).

<sup>8</sup> Copper: no. 1 (no. 1 specimen). Electro: no. 15 (no. 1 s.).

<sup>9</sup> Locations no. 3 (no. 1 specimen), 4 (no. 2 s.), 6 (no. 1 s.), 7 (no. 3 s.), 8 (no. 1 s.), 10-16 (no. 1 s. each).

Norbello (Oristano, from now on OR), St. Maria della Mercede; 7. Cuglieri (OR), Cornus (Columbaris and Corchinas); 8 Nurachi (OR), St. Giovanni Battista; 9. Cabras (OR), St. Giorgio; 10. Nuragus (Sud Sardegna, from now on SU), nuraghe Santu Millanu; 11. Isili (SU); 12. Genuri (SU), nuraghe St. Marco; 13. Serri (SU), Sa Cungiadura Manna; 14. Dolianova-Serdiana (SU), Bruncu 'e s'Olia. Fibulae of unknown provenance: 15. Cagliari, Museo Archeologico Nazionale; 16. Sulcis-Iglesiente; 17. San Vito (SU) (elaboration by Marco Muresu; CC OA).

Arched fibulae are attested from Porto Torres-San Gavino (Sanciu, 1993: 201-202), Serri-Santa Vittoria (Serra, 1998: 366) and Abini-Teti (Taramelli, 1914: 387; Serra, 2002: 149-150; Serra, 2010: 531-532, 555) (fig. 2). Their morphological features recall a typology of artefacts which is widely attested in the Byzantine Mediterranean during 4-5 c. CE and it's known as 'crossbow fibulae' (Celik, 2016). The most relevant finding is the object from Porto Torres, which was found in a tile-roofed grave with NE-SW orientation in a open-air necropolis placed South of the Romanesque cathedral of San Gavino. The artefact was in bronze, with a gold patina. It was engraved with agemina in the arch and the foot, with alternated patterns of squares and circles. It could have been related originally to a wealthy man or woman (Serra, 2010: 532).

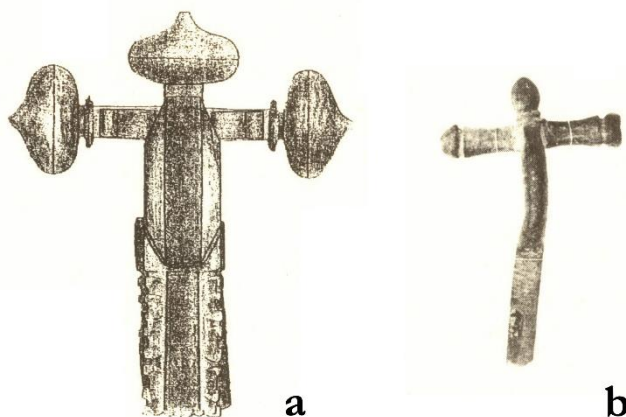


Figure 2. Bronze crossbow fibulae from Porto Torres - St. Gavino (a) and Teti - Abini (elaboration by Paolo Benito Serra; CC OA).

Another interesting example of arched fibula was found in Giorre Verdi-La Crucca, near Sassari, in the mid-XX c. CE during an excavation of a Domus de Janas, a peculiar typology of burial of Prehistoric chronology, carved into the rock in the shape of a house (with a different number of rooms, depending on the complexity of the tomb) (Rovina, 2002). The object is made of bronze and presents a perforation in the upper part of the arc. The latter is decorated with two parallel lines of yellow squares and green glass pastes; the foot has the shape of head of a small animal, probably a turtle, with two circular cavities instead of eyes, in which were originally two glass pastes (fig. 3). The peculiarities of the fibula recall comparisons with productions of Pannonia and Northern Italy (Serra, 2010: 544). The artifact was found along with other grave goods such as a golden ring, an earring with a globular pendant ('a globo mammellato') and a fragmented jug with ribbed bands on its surface. All these elements suggested a global chronology to the 7-8 c. CE. (Serra, 1976).



Figure 3. Sassari - Giorre Verdi/La Crucca, bronze arched fibula with zoomorphic head and a double line of decoration of glass squares and circles (photo by Daniela Rovina; CC OA).



Figure 4 Cabras - San Giorgio, bronze zoomorphic fibulae (photo by Barbara Panico; CC OA).

Finally, an arched fibula is presumed lost. It was found in Sant'Andrea Frius (central Sardinia) in 1922, along with other grave goods belonging to a man – presumably of military social status – buried in a stone sarcophagus. The burial was unearthed during the building of a house and all the objects were dispersed by the workers, including the fibula (Taramelli, 1923: 290-291).

As regards the zoomorphic specimens, the two in the form of an insect (a cicada, fig. 4) were found in S. Giorgio, near Cabras, along with a numerous set of metal artefact of unclear provenance which have been hypothetically related to a settlement (Panico, 2013: 142-143). The only known exemplar of dove-shaped fibula comes from

Sorres, near Borutta. The latter is on a limestone heel on top of which, at 524 m height, is still visible a polylobate nuraghe next to a basilica in Pisan Romanesque style (built between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, cathedral until 1503) and its Benedictine monastery (Muresu, forthcoming).

The site has been the subject of a settlement continuity from the Bronze Age to the present day. The first archaeological informations, although with no reference to stratigraphy, date back to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1965-66 the traces of an early medieval cemetery on the hill were identified (Maetzke, 1966). Towards the east, on the same line of the apse of the basilica, numerous finds were unearthed in the following decades during agricultural work or accidental discoveries. Among them was the above-mentioned fibula. The latter presents engraved motifs of lines and circles, to recreate the eyes of the bird and the decoration on its tail (fig. 5).



Figure 5 Borutta - Sorres, bronze fibula shaped as a dove and decorated with lines and circles (photo by Marco Muresu; CC OA).

The disc-shaped fibulae are the most documented set (16 artifacts) and that for which it is possible to theorize a local scale market and diffusion. As a matter of fact, the fibulae known in Sardinia do not show specific similarities with the contemporary products of the rest of the Mediterranean (Baldini, 1999: 67-112, 153-166). This suggests their origin as a result of local workshops, also for countertrend of using silver while in the contemporary Italic and European area dominated the gold (Dalceggio, 2018: 28, 67). The majority of the record is precisely made of silver, but there are also examples in gold, bronze and a single case in electro; most are intact. At a decorative level 12 specimens out of 15 have in the center an umbo<sup>10</sup>, only in two cases affected by a median apex<sup>11</sup>. The central element is the point of convergence, as well as the slight concavity that characterizes the objects, of a frame with thin lines in relief that, depending on the fibula, is in the form of broken<sup>12</sup> or wavy segments<sup>13</sup>. Only three objects are perforated with pelt motifs or double volute side by side<sup>14</sup>, while only one specimen has the surface affected by alveoli originally intended, probably, to accommodate glazed enamels according to the cloisonné technique<sup>15</sup>. The latter is applied on a disc-shape fibula in gilded bronze from Isili (fig. 6): the artifact – stylistically datable to the 7th century, currently at the Archaeological Museum of Cagliari – presents a decoration with six triangular cells scaled, facing the inside, and straight strips, alternating with as many cells facing the

outside. In the center there is a circular bezel with a raised edge. The origin of the artifact is unknown (Spano, 1857: 139-140; Muresu, 2018: 177). According to Martina Dalceggio, who authored a recent inventory/classification of disc-shaped fibulae found in the Italian Peninsula from Sixth to Seventh century, this would be a possible imitation of a type of “narrow cell” production linked to gold and silver fibulae with structured and complex decorations (Dalceggio, 2018: 62-63).

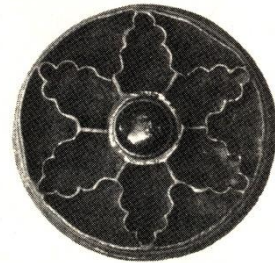


Figure 6 Isili, disc-shape gilded bronze fibula (from Dalceggio, 2018; CC OA).

Of primary interest is undoubtedly the specimen coming from Bruncu e s'Olia, between Serdiana and Dolianova, in the rural hinterland of Cagliari. The object is in exquisite conditions, except for some superficial damage and for missing part of the coupling system. It is a fairly wide item (diameter 6.2 cm; weight 39.5 g) made of gold foil, with a slightly hollow flat edge. The decoration is divided into three registers, the former affected by three series of broken lines enclosed within three concentric frames with detected edge; center register has smooth surface while the third, surrounding the umbo, repeats the pattern with broken lines but on four registers. The fibula was discovered in unsafe stratigraphic conditions (Taramelli, 1919: 141); however, it was part of a necropolis with where possibly characters of high social rank would have been buried. This for the preciousness and richness of the decorative artifacts as grave goods (Muresu, 2018: 158, with previous references; Muresu, 2022a: 111). Among the latter is in particular a pair of gold earrings with bell-shaped pendants and globes, suspended by small chains (fig. 7).

Similar objects have been discovered more recently (2006) through archaeological research conducted in the main building (Tower A) of the nuraghe St. Marco near Genuri, in central Sardinia (Dore, 2016). Inside the protohistoric monument, eventually reused during the early Middle Ages as a burial – a recurring trend in the case of the funerary finds of rural Byzantine Sardinia (Muresu, 2022b) – were a fragmentary disc-shaped golden fibula and an elaborate golden earring with pendants (fig. 8). The former is shaped similarly to the earrings from Dolianova-Serdiana: three registers along the outer edge, four inside and, in the middle, a smooth surface band. There are, however, some differences, such as the alternation between the motifs in segments and the series of pelts, which can be found both in the first and third registers. The earring has also an exquisite figurative decoration: its plaque presents, on both sides, by two facing peacocks, recognizable by the tuft of feathers on the head and the long tail that develops in length.

<sup>10</sup> No. 3-4, 6, 7a, 7c, 8, 10-12, 14-16.

<sup>11</sup> No. 6, 15.

<sup>12</sup> No. 8, 12, 14-16.

<sup>13</sup> No. 3, 7a.

<sup>14</sup> No. 7c (peltae), 8 (volute), 10 (peltae).

<sup>15</sup> No. 11.



Figure 7. Dolianova - Bruncu e s'Olia, disc-shape golden fibula (left) and a couple of earrings with glass and gold pendants (right) (from Muresu, 2018; CC OA).

Between the two birds is a *kantharos* (a vessel with two high vertical handles), to which the animals drink; above the vase is visible a Greek cross potent. The scene on the obverse is embellished by a complex polychrome, with blue, green and purple nuances, made through the technique of *champlevé* enamel, which involved the revenue of alveoli on the surface of a metal object and their subsequent filling with vitreous enamel, which was then sanded and polished after firing and cooling. The rear side of the artifact is made through the cantilever technique.



Figure 8. Genuri - Nuraghe St. Marco, disc-shape fragmented golden fibula (left) and parts of earrings with gold pendants (from Dore, 2016; CC OA).

A proximity in the ornamental motifs to the fibulae of Dolianova-Serdiana and Genuri comes from a fragmented object from an uncertain location of Sulcis-Iglesiente (Salvi 1989: 216; Serra 2006: 361, tav. V, fig. 6) and especially the exceptional electro fibula kept at the National Archaeological Museum of Cagliari (Taramelli, 1919: 147). The latter, also of uncertain origin, presents the canonical alternation between decorated registers and bands without ornamental motifs, all arranged around the central umbo enriched by a median apex (Muresu, 2022a: 111-112) (fig. 9).



Figure 9. Cagliari - Museo Archeologico Nazionale, disc-shape electro fibula (photo by Marco Muresu; CC OA).

Another fibula of remarkable workmanship is that identified during the excavations at the medieval church of S. Maria della Mercede in Norbello (Oristano). It was one of the prominent elements among the artifacts of the grave called '*alpha*', revealed a rich female deposition located in direct contact with the foundations of the religious building of the Middle Ages, under the right wall (D. Salvi in Sanna, Manca, Salvi, 2016: 51-52). The disc consists of two rows of four concentric annular elements, decorated with a zigzag pattern and separated from each other by a smooth face. The central part is slightly hollow and has the umbo decorated with an apex. As it was said, the latter is tightly comparable to the apex on the Electro fibula kept in Cagliari's Archaeological Museum. The zig-zag pattern, on the other hand, is comparable to the analogue decoration on two fragmentary gold objects from Berre (Bortigali) (Serra, 1987: 107; Muresu, 2019: 511-513) (fig. 10), about 20 km as the crow flies from Norbello (Muresu, 2019: 517-518). The needle is long and thin and through a ring end it binds to a pin attached to two rings welded on the back (fig. 11).

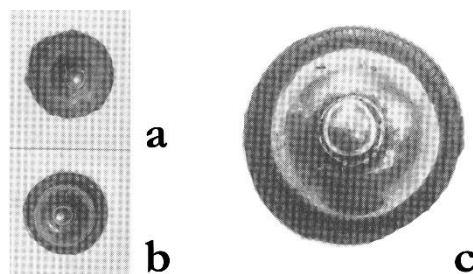


Figure 10. Bortigali - Berre, fragmentary disc-shape golden fibulae (a-b) and close caption of the fibula no. b (c) (from Muresu, 2019; CC OA).

Like Genuri, even the fibula of Norbello comes from punctual stratigraphic data. It was discovered in association with a pair of earrings in silver and gold with a pseudospherical globet passing through – also made with the use of two different metals, hypothetically for its provenance from the same goldsmith's workshop, then a silver ring with a monogram, a button holder and a series of small plates pertinent to the garment of the deceased (Muresu, 2022a: 109-110, with earlier bibliography). An interesting feature of Norbello's fibula is its bimetallism, similarly to the couple of earrings to which it was associated in the grave. This common detail could suggest the provenance of both objects from the same workshops, or even their conception as a *parure* jewellery accessory. It is also plausible the artefacts would have been a prerogative of high-rank buyers, to be used as a status symbol for their preciousness and exquisite workmanship.



Figure 11. Norbello - St. Maria della Mercede, disc-shape fibula in silver and gold (from Muresu, 2019; CC OA).

Another notable example comes from the necropolis of the early Middle Ages identified below the present parish church of Nurachi (Oristano) were brought to light a series of burials with significant equipment and often associated with young subjects. The *Iota* tomb, obtained reusing an amphora, was discovered leaning against a wall outside the early Christian complex, near the apse. The tombs contained skeletal remains of a child and an adult, buried together (Stefani, 1985: 59). The very young *Iota* I wore a silver disc fibula, located near the right shoulder, while on the sides of the skull were two silver earrings with drop pendant, identical (Coroneo, 2011: 277). The fibula is slightly convex and divided into three registers. The first is composed of two concentric bands decorated respectively with oblique segments in relief very dense and converging to two to two, and very similar but more thinned segments; the second order has a smooth and slightly hollow surface while the third, that frames the smooth umbo, is decorated with open elements with double volute side by side (fig. 12).

The rendering of the decorative motifs of the fibula found at Nurachi makes it possible to compare it with other objects, equally in silver, from Oristano and Northern Sardinia. The first case refers to three artefacts from Cornus (near Cuglieri), where is an early Christian complex with necropolis (Giuntella, 1999). Two fibulae are of unknown origin: although certainly from Cornus, the details of any reference tombs are unknown (Amante Simoni, Martorelli, 1986: 188, nn. 144-145). Respectively, the specimens are a silver undecorated fibula with thickened edge, and one with eighteen pelt motifs arranged radially around a central smooth umbo, enclosed in a frame around the edge (fig. 13).



Figure 12. Nurachi - St. Giovanni Battista, disc-shape silver fibula (left) and a couple of earrings (right) (from Muresu, 2018; CC OA).

The latter can be compared with a silver fibula found inside a burial belonging to a burial of prepuberal age (6-7 years) discovered during recent excavations at the nuraghe Santu Millanu of Nuragus. The grave, in an earthen pit covered and closed on the top with roof tiles, was partially delimited, to the east, by an alignment of five quadrangular stone basins/urns, without lid, interpreted as the result of a hypothetical reuse in order to delimit the funerary area (Pilo, Dore, Candilio, Deaddis, 2021). The research is still ongoing and every hypothesis remains open.

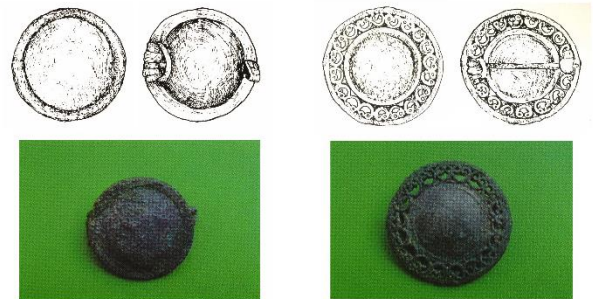


Figure 13. Cuglieri - Cornus, disc-shape silver fibulae with thickened edge (left) and pelt motifs arranged radially around a central smooth umbo (right) (from Amante Simoni, Martorelli 1986; CC OA).

Returning to Cornus, a last fibula is known to have definitely come from a grave, and the woman who wore it was a *honesta femina* named *Patriga* (Martorelli, 2000: 28-29, n. 5; Martorelli, 2011: 729-730). The fibula was found below her mandible. It has a silver foil on which goes a decoration in three registers. The former is decorated with continuous broken lines, thicker on one side and thinner on the other; the second register has a smooth surface but, near the umbo, has a continuous decoration of small semicircles of equal thickness. The object is framed by a wavy line (fig. 14). It dates to the full 7th century and was found in association with a crochet which bore the words, on three sides, PATRIGA FEMINA HONESTA (Muresu, 2018: 257-258, with previous references). It was also associated with some remnants of golden fabric, placed at the height of the head and probably relevant to a bonnet that was to ensure the hairstyle of the deceased, along with the pin (Giuntella, 1999: 147). The fibula, moreover, recalls a similar specimen coming from the already mentioned area of S. Pietro di Sorres, Borutta (Serra, 1987: 120-121) (fig. 15).

In conclusion, from the brief examination of the cases exposed

so far, it is however possible to recognize for the disc-shaped fibulae of Byzantine Sardinia the presence of two main typological groups, distinguished according to the metal and the characteristics of the shape. The first set refers to artifacts such as fibulae from Dolianova, Genuri, Norbello or that of unknown origin kept at the Archaeological Museum of Cagliari. Their characteristics, as already stated, make them valuable artifacts and convincing evidence of the presence of high-ranking characters (Muresu, 2022a). Similar considerations can also be extended to fibulas such as those found at Cornus or Nurachi: the usage of silver is equally recognizable a potential social value display, maybe relating to the middle ranks of society – such as Patriga, for instance (Muresu, 2018: 257-259).

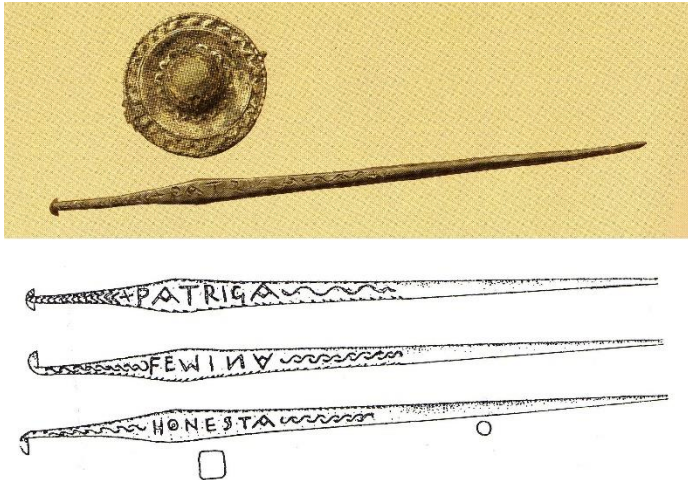


Figure 14. Cuglieri - Cornus, disc-shape silver fibula and crochet of Patriga, Femina Honesta (from Muresu, 2018; CC OA).

The archaeological contextualization, where possible, leads to the identification of a majority presence of fibulas in female tombs, even if examples such as the case of Sorres lead us to believe that similar artifacts could also be the prerogative of the male dress.



Figure 15. Borutta - Sorres, disc-shape silver fibula (photo by Paolo Benito Serra; CC OA).

## Résumé - Les fibules byzantines de Sardaigne : une enquête :

L'article fournit une critique globale des fibules de culture byzantine et de leur provenance trouvées en Sardaigne. Les preuves actuelles comprennent 25 spécimens de fibules, trouvés dans 14 emplacements identifiables, tandis que 3 découvertes sont de origine inconnue. Les fibules les plus attestées sont celles en forme de disque, alors qu'il existe moins de spécimens en arc de cercle et forme zoomorphe. Chaque type a des spécificités individuelles. La contextualisation archéologique, lorsque cela est possible, conduit à identifier une présence majoritaire de fibules dans les tombes féminines, même si des artefacts similaires pourraient être aussi l'apanage de la tenue vestimentaire masculine. Leurs caractéristiques en font des artefacts précieux et des preuves convaincantes de la présence de personnages de haut rang, utilisant les fibules comme une potentielle démonstration de valeur sociale.

**Mots-clés :** Fibules byzantines ; Sardaigne ; Objets façonnés en métal ; Archéologue byzantin.

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