

Title: The Hadrianopolis Crossbow Fibula

Site found: South Necropolis, trench K-9, M-203, by excavation at Hadrianopolis (Karabük, Eskipazar), Turkey.

Date found: 24th July 2024

Excavation inventory number: HP 24-3-ALO-1

Date: 4th-5th centuries

Geography: Hadrianopolis (Adrianople)

Culture: Late Roman/Early Byzantine

Medium: Brass plated bronze

Dimensions: W: 25,53g x 4,6cm x 7,7 cm x 3,4 cm

Current Institution: Archaeological Museum, Karabük, Turkey



Fig. 1. Karabük, Eskipazar, Inventory Number HP 24-3-ALO-1. 24.7.2024, found in the South Necropolis, trench K-9, M-203. Brass plated bronze, 4th-5th centuries. The Hadrianopolis crossbow fibula. Horizontal view head knob looking right ways and vertical in pinning position. Reproduced with the kind permission of the Hadrianopolis Excavation Director, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Ersin Çelikbaş.

Alt Text: "Photos showing crossbow fibula. Left is horizontal view and right is horizontal."

Keywords: crossbow fibula; Hadrianopolis (Adrianople); Later Roman/Early Byzantine; army; military dress; civil administration

Citation: Sercan Yandim Aydin, "Hadrianopolis Crossbow Fibula," in "The Material Culture of the Medieval Black Sea," *Medieval Black Sea Project*, edited by Teresa Shawcross et al., <https://medievalblackseaproject.princeton.edu/hadrianopolis-crossbow-fibula-sercan-yandim-aydin/>

The crossbow fibula (fig. 1) was discovered during the excavational season of Summer 2024 in a previously plundered tomb located to the south of the main excavation site in Hadrianopolis,

today Eskipazar, in the Karabük province of Turkey (fig. 2).¹ It is an onion-knob brass-plated bronze fibula with significant characteristics of the type attributed to the late Roman Period.

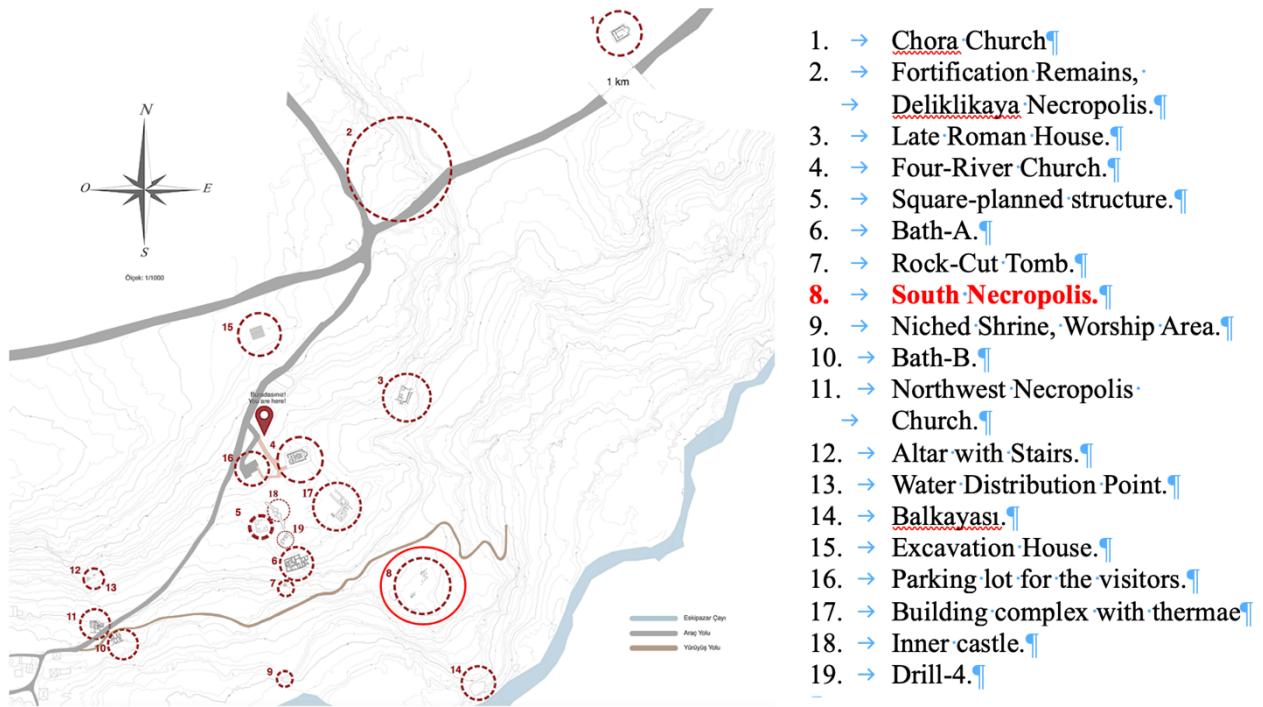


Fig 2. The excavation site showing the South Necropolis labelled *with number 8*. Drawn by Damla Kumbasar. Reproduced with the *kind* permission of the Hadrianopolis Excavation Director Assoc. Prof. Dr. Ersin Çelikbaş.

Alt text: “Site plan showing different civil, religious buildings and infrastructures.”

This fairly substantial item (see detailed drawing in fig. 3) is made of hefty metal has at its head a crossbar and a curved, semicircular bow that extends into a long, decorated spine. The bow head ends in large hexagonal knob, while two further knobs of the same shape are located at either end of the crossbar. The crossbar is decorated on its flat upper side and also has rounded loops on its underside. Its spine is decorated with pairs of scrolls on either side.²

¹ I should like to express my thanks to Assoc. Prof. Dr. Ersin Çelikbaş of Karabük University, director of Hadrianopolis, Paphlagonia excavation, for granting me the permission to work on the crossbow. I am indebted to him and his team members for their support.

² As an illustrative example, see the Monza cathedral, Diptych of Stilicho, ca. 395. With the foot pointing upwards, they held the cloak together on the right shoulder, as can be seen.

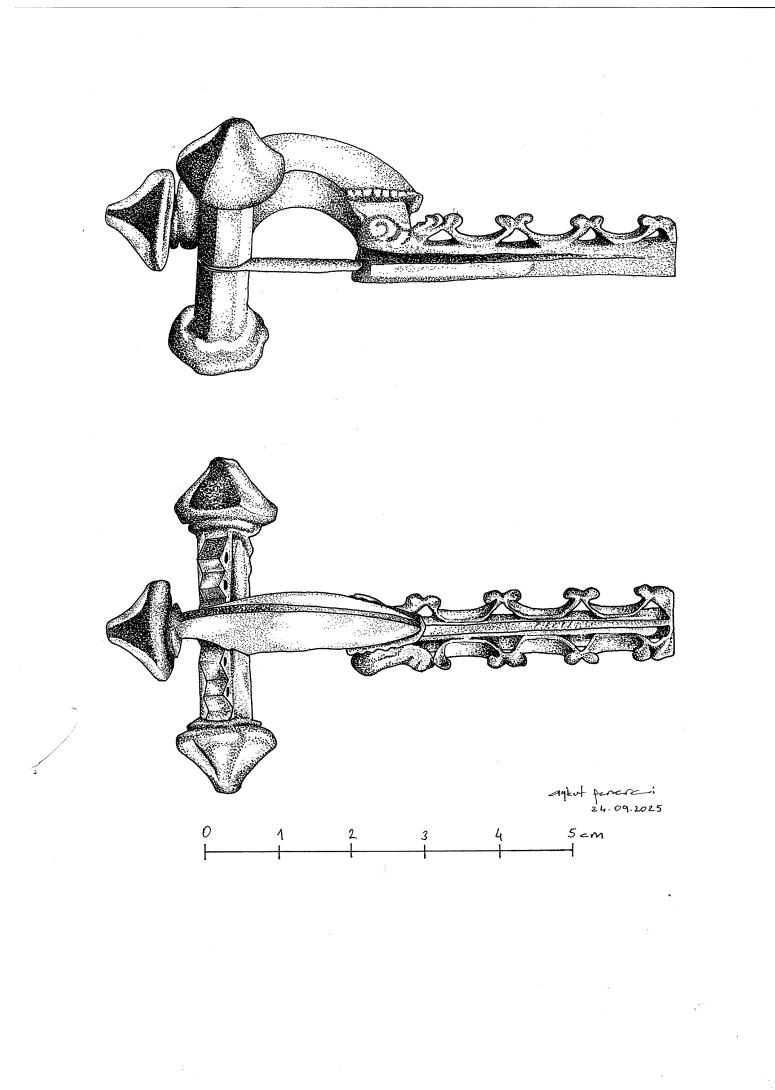


Fig 3. The Hadrianopolis crossbow fibula, top and sideways. Drawing by Aykut Fenerci according to the instructions of Sercan Yandim Aydin, reproduced with the permission of Sercan Yandim Aydin.

Alt Text: “Drawing of a Late Roman crossbow fibula with onion knobs.”

In his ground-breaking work on the chronology of fibulae, Erwin Keller refers to this type of fibulae as “Type 6” – a classification that may, for reasons of clarity, be usefully applied to later studies as well.³ The production technique of this group includes casting in sections using

³ See especially Erwin Keller, *Die Spätromischen Grabfunde in Südbayern* (München: Beck, 1971). Keller’s classification and dating is decisive in defining the type as late Roman onion-knob brooches. He denotes the group under Type 6 as 6.5. The same typology is used in Riha Emilie, *Die Römischen Fibeln aus Augst und Kaiseraugst: Die Neufunde Seit 1975* (Augst: Römermuseum, 1994). It remains the accepted grouping of fibulae. See, for example, Barbara Deppert-Lippitz, “A Late Antique Crossbow Fibula in the Metropolitan Museum of Art”, *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 35 (2000): 39–7; Philipp von Rummel, *Habitus barbarus: Kleidung und*

molds and then assembling these sections, but also the alternative of hammering from solid metal. In the case of the Hadrianopolis crossbow fibula, the object has been assembled from constitutive parts. Although its overall shape is very similar across different subtypes (fig. 4), there appear to have been regional stylistic differences.⁴ This fact suggests that small workshops may have been active in different locations across the empire – including in the frontiers. This notwithstanding, however, the fibulae should be identified primarily as military artefacts exported from central, state-owned *fabricae* founded in Pannonia or in Illyricum.⁵

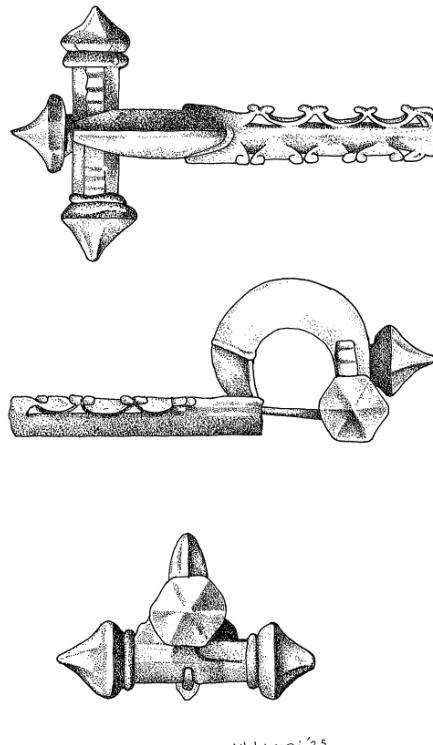


Fig. 4. Zürich, Landesmuseum, Fibula, Type 6, Examples 1496, Inv. Landesmuseum Zürich 20141, FO: Reg. 22A, Grab 556, on the left and 1497, Inv. Landesmuseum Zürich 24642, EO: Reg. 22A, Grab 1309, on the right. Drawn by Aykut Fenerci according to the instructions of Sercan Yandim Aydin and reproduced with the permission of Sercan Yandim Aydin.

Repräsentation spätantiker Eliten im 4. und 5. Jahrhundert (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2007); Sylvia Lycke, From Commodity to Singularity: The Production of Crossbow Brooches and the Rise of the Late Roman Military Elite,” *Journal of Archaeological Science* 82 (2017): 50–61; Peter Henrich, “Die Silberne Zwiebelknopffibel von Osterspai Mit Inschrift des Sapricius”, *Bonner Jahrbücher* 219 (2019): 203–211.

⁴ For the sub-types and their distinguishing features also see, Keller, *Spätromischen Grabfunde*, 34.

⁵ For the *Notitia Dignitatum*, see “Digitale Bibliothek - Münchener Digitalisierungszentrum” at <https://daten.digitale-sammlungen.de/bsb00005863/images/index.html?id=00005863&groesser=&fip=eayayztsewqeaya%20%20xssdasyztsqrseayaxs&no=6&seite=357> [last accessed 17th February 2026].

Alt Text: “Drawing from various sides of another Late Roman crossbow fibula for purposes of comparison.”

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Becoming especially richly decorated in the early 4th century, the era of the Tetrarchy and the beginning of Constantinian rule, these crossbow fibulae increasingly indicated affiliations in the army and administration and were exclusively worn by high-ranking military and civilian officials. As a result, objects such as the Hadrianopolis crossbow fibula were intended to serve as identifiable symbols of state authority rather than reveal personal aesthetic choices.⁶ Indeed, recent developments in scholarship about late Roman fibulae – moving from a purely antiquarian concern to a paradigm that emphasizes historical contextualization – insist upon the socio-cultural role of these objects, especially as military insignia reflecting the owner’s identity. Objects as such were worn as part of attire during daily military life, on official parades, during campaigns, or on the battlefield, where they were expected to be seen and recognized. The fact of both centralized and localized production of these fibulae, as well as their adoption by a military elite of growing political influence during the Late Roman period, points to their increased significance as well as their distribution in a changing social context. The Hadrianopolis crossbow, which so far constitutes a unique find of its type not only for Turkey but also for the regions east of the Balkans more generally, helps contribute to a better understanding of the city founded in Paphlagonia named after the emperor Hadrian.⁷ As the excavation of the site progresses, more information will be revealed about the population both of the urban center and its surrounding region, allowing us to construct a more rounded and complex picture of the identity of the object’s owner.

Biography

Sercan Yandim Aydin is an Associate Professor at the Department of History of Art, Hacettepe University, Ankara. Her recent publications include “Renaissance Before the Renaissance: Human Aspects of Late Byzantine Painting. Case: The Anastasis: An Image of Liberation and Resurrection, Studenica Monastery,” in *Holy King Milutin and His Age: History, Literature, Art* (2023).

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⁶ Type 6 is only 4.3% of the total brooch collection and is characteristic of the middle and late imperial period.

⁷ M. Jurkowski, “Place names commemorating Hadrian – an attempt to approximate the scale of the phenomenon”, *Echa Przeszłości*, XXIV/1 (2023): 27–46 and Marty T. Boatwright, *Hadrian and the Cities of the Roman Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000). Cities named after the emperor Hadrian are numerous. The historical records give different numbers of cities that were either founded by the emperor or named after him. In the case of the Paphlagonian Hadrianopolis numismatic evidence confirms its name. The city is situated in the south-western part of the Roman province of Paphlagonia, and located 3 km west of the modern town of Eskipazar of the Karabük province.

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