

Provincial Roman Objects in The Metropolitan Museum of Art

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ABOUT TEN YEARS AGO, Michel Feugère¹ expressed three reasons why bronze fibulae of Roman times provide a particularly interesting field for investigation: their abundance, their widespread locations, and types diversified enough to allow rigorous classification. In this paper, which is based on my participation in a symposium entitled “Migration Period Art in The Metropolitan Museum of Art,” which took place in May 1995, I have chosen to discuss the provincial Roman fibulae in the Museum’s collection, to establish a brief catalogue, and to open up for discussion issues of historiography and problems relating to this type of object.²

It was not until the end of the nineteenth century that the first important typological study of these objects was published.³ Oscar Almgren, its author, emphasized that the same models had circulated in geographical areas far away from one another, and he implicitly postulated the existence of centers specializing in the production and export of various types of fibulae. Not much later, Morin-Jean⁴ proposed a more complete classification, which was applicable to most of the fibulae from Roman Gaul; he also tried to establish a relative chronology based on an “evolutionary” scheme.

In spite of their imperfections, these pioneer approaches provided a chronological and typological framework for archaeologists of the first half of the twentieth century, as their own material occurred in the context of different regions—such as Pannonia, dealt with by Ilona Kovrig, Ibolya Sellye, and Erzsébet von Patek,⁵ and the Rhineland, dealt with by Kurt Exner.⁶ A further stage was reached in 1956–57 with the publication by Lucien Lerat⁷ of the fibulae belonging to the Besançon and Montbéliard museums: Morin-Jean’s previous typology was then much improved and applied to a broader base of documentation, which allowed for clearer chronological data. The important study of fibulae from Haute-Normandie (the region around Rouen) by Marc-Adrien Dollfus⁸

in the 1970s and several shorter catalogues were to follow the line of thought found in Lerat’s publications. But meanwhile, with her study of fibulae from Switzerland, Elisabeth Ettlinger⁹ broke new ground: she chose to ignore ancient geographical denominations that seemed not to correspond with true centers of production but designated types simply by a number so that they could be evaluated in the most objective way.

A few years later, in their publication of material from Argentomagus (Argenton-sur-Creuse, in central France), Raymond Albert and Isabelle Fauduet¹⁰ added to the definition of types: they drew attention to the fact that the means of attaching the pin (variable in some models) could not in itself constitute a criterion for classification. At this point Feugère’s contribution, mentioned above, was published. We are indebted to him for establishing the new typology, which is the primary one used today. As with Ettlinger, the classification is based on numbering types and subtypes in sequence—allowing, of course, for certain overlaps—as closely as possible to the chronological sequence; for that, the more frequently recorded associations with dated layers and grave goods are especially useful. Indeed, the breadth of the geographical area covered by Feugère—the whole of southern Gaul, including most of the principal types from anywhere in the Roman world—justifies our use of this typology in the present study.

Early imperial times are the best represented in the Metropolitan’s collection, with nine or ten pieces in an eleven-piece gathering. The fibula in Figure 1 (66.152.4) belongs to the group whose pin attachments—the one shown here is broken—consist of a hinge (and no longer by a spring, as was the case with earlier types), and whose bow was replaced by a broader piece (crescent-shaped as in the Greco-Roman pelta ornament, provided with several protuberances, and including a circle).¹¹ These fibulae were found in many parts of the Roman Empire; northern Gaul and Britain seem to have been the regions where relatively

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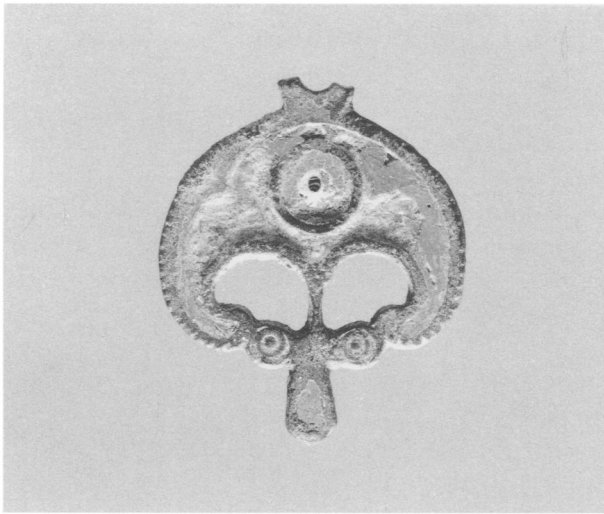


Figure 1. Fibula. Champlevé enamel on bronze, H. 4.9 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. J. J. Klejman, 1966, 66.152.4



Figure 2. Pair of fibulae. Champlevé enamel on bronze, H. 7 cm and 6.6 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Museum Accession, X.298.1, 2



Figure 3. Fibula. Bronze, H. 3.2 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1955, 55.140



Figure 4. Pair of fibulae. Champlevé enamel on bronze, eyes studded with gold, L. 4.9 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917, 17.192.147, 8

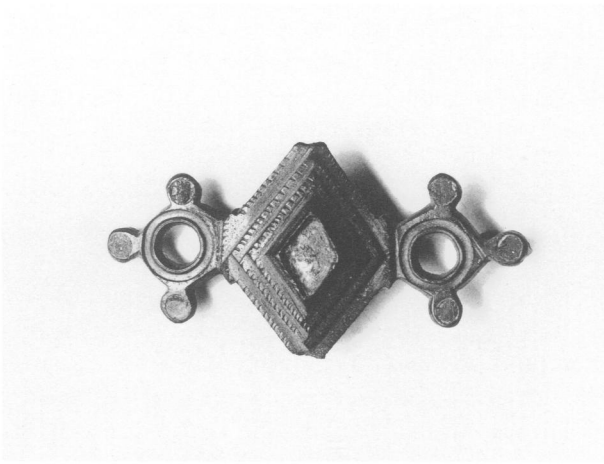


Figure 5. Fibula. Bronze, formerly inlaid with enamel, L. 5 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917, 17.192.11

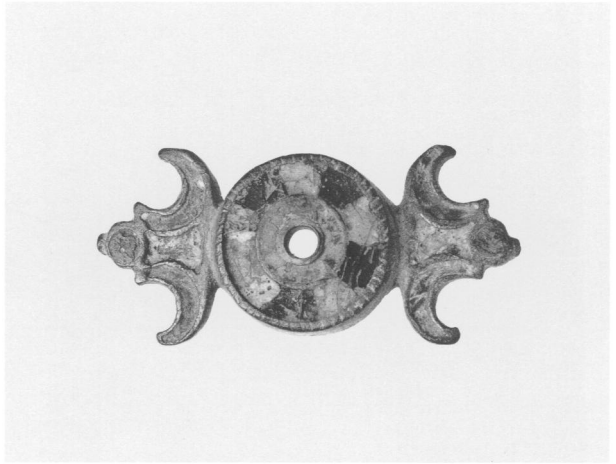


Figure 6. Fibula. Champlevé enamel on bronze, L. 4.5 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917, 17.194.1912

sophisticated shapes occurred (as can be seen in the Museum's example). Archaeological contexts of finds in Gaul, German Switzerland (Augst), and Britain (Camulodunum, i.e., Colchester) enable us to date the production of these items to between A.D. 30/40 and 60/70; their use, however, may have been extended to the end of the first century or even to the beginning of the second, as is suggested here by the heavy use of enameling, which is characteristic of later models.

For the two fibulae seen in Figure 2 (X.298.1, 2), the convex bow explains the conventional reference to "turtle" fibulae;¹² the head and foot, which in other variants may be treated as reptilian masks, are indicated here simply by moldings. Otherwise, it really belongs to the diversified group of nondiscoid geometric fibulae. Here the enameled ornamentation consists of triangles and wavy lines on a partly silvered bow. The geographic range of this model was very broad: examples have also been found in Britain as well as in Gaul and also in present-day Germany, the Netherlands, Hungary, and Turkey; others have been noted at Doura-Europos in Syria and in the former Soviet Union. Archaeological contexts in German Switzerland (in Augst) suggest a date as early as the third quarter of the first century, and, in spite of some finds in later contexts, production probably ended at the beginning of the second century.

Number 55.140 (Figure 3) belongs to a general type whose production seems to have extended over a rather long period:¹³ early variants appear during the reign of Tiberius (14–37); the reign of Claudius (41–54) coincides with the apogee of the type; and evolution continues during the second half of the first century and into the second, with shapes becoming progressively more sophisticated. The bows of these fibulae, often divided in two or three segments, present an increasing number of moldings and spread outward to a greater or lesser degree. Enameling is found on the two main sections of the bow in the Museum's fibula, which is not as complex as on variants with lateral protuberances; thus, the Metropolitan's fibula might belong to the second half of the first century or to the beginning of the second. The diffusion of this type seems to have occurred in areas whose southern border corresponds with present-day Switzerland and central France.

The pair seen in Figure 4 (17.192.147, 8) correspond to one of the variants, also very prevalent, of another type.¹⁴ Two main subgroups should be distinguished: the bow may have a simple zoomorphic subject, or, as in the present case, a complex one, such as fighting or pursuing animals. These figures, usually flat and stylized, may sometimes be treated with

greater plasticity, which is the case for one of the other Museum fibulae (see Figure 9; 47.100.18). Here in Figure 4 we have to deal with a boar followed by a dog. In spite of the fact that this constitutes a complex subject, the treatment of the boar exactly fits one of the classifications of Feugère's variants, where the animal appears alone: the outline is identical, as are parallel incisions on the neck. These characteristics seem to imply the production of a single workshop, but its location cannot be pinpointed because of the lack (at least thus far) of finds concentrated in a particular region. These objects should probably be dated between the Flavian period (the last decades of the first century) and the middle of the second century; the use of enameling is generally much less restrained in later fibulae.

Number 17.192.11 (Figure 5) belongs to a group characterized by two or three different segmented shapes.¹⁵ The finds of examples of this kind are also numerous and occur in a very broad geographic area. In the present case, the restrained use of enameling may again imply a rather early date—the beginning of the second century, as suggested by Ettlinger's dating of rather similar specimens found in Switzerland.¹⁶

Number 17.194.1912 (Figure 6) corresponds exactly to Feugère's type 26, variant c 3 a.¹⁷ Within the very diversified group of geometric enameled fibulae, a particularly homogeneous series, characterized by a circular central part that has an ornament in the round (usually a fish, whose previous attachment is now marked by a hole in the Museum's example) and is flanked by two symmetrical crescents. Its spread is very broad again, from Britain and the present-day Netherlands to central Europe (Hungary); isolated finds have also been noted in Italy and Morocco. The distribution map published by Feugère, however, shows a strong concentration in the Rhineland, around Mainz: the existence of a workshop in this area is suggested, but other regions have also revealed many fibulae of this kind. For dating, one should refer again to the general evolution of the use of enameling: polychrome partitions of this kind seem to belong to the second century.

The type corresponding to number 19.192.14 (Figure 7) seems to have been rather uncommon; at any rate, it belongs to the bulk of geometric fibulae, and a late-first- or second-century date appears plausible—without being able to be precise.

Number 17.194.1917 (Figures 8a, 8b, closed and open) is not a fibula but actually a small box; however, both the format and similarity of the enameling justify discussing it here. It corresponds to a model that is known in the Rhineland,¹⁸ Normandy,¹⁹ and central

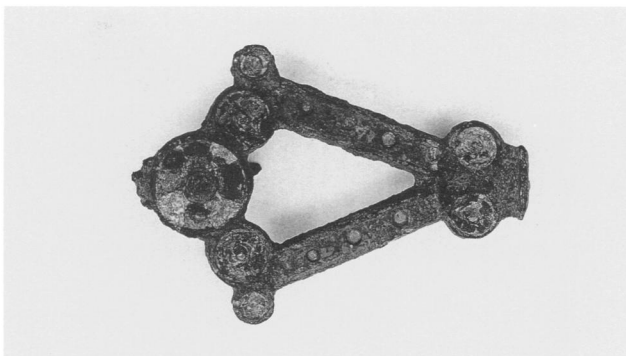


Figure 7. Fibula. Champlévé enamel on bronze, L. 4.9 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917, 17.192.14

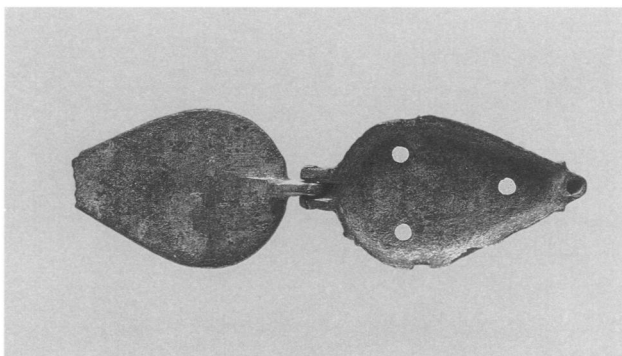
Gaul.²⁰ Again, an approximate late-first- or second-century date is most likely.

Number 47.100.18 (Figure 9) is exceptional because of its highly plastic treatment and naturalistic rendering: combined with the expressive face of the panther, the inlaid niello spots surrounded by silver on the body lend it a truly lifelike appearance. But otherwise, the attitude recalls what is seen on much flatter and more stylized fibulae, especially from Hungary²¹ and Switzerland.²² An approximate attribution to the second century, for lack of examples close to this one in well-dated contexts, might again be proposed.

Number 17.192.19 (Figure 10) corresponds to a type²³ that includes discoid fibulae having a figurative ornament in the round: on this example, as in most cases, the ornament is in the shape of a fish. The area of find distribution here again is very broad. In relation to the preceding models, a somewhat later date might be suggested (the second half of the second century or the beginning of the third) because on this



Figure 9. Fibula. Bronze and silver, L. 6.5 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fletcher Fund, 1947, 47.100.18



Figures 8a,b. Box. Champlévé enamel on bronze, H. 3.9 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917, 17.194.1917

fibula the enameling now extends to the major surface of the disk.

Number 66.16 (Figure 11) can be ascribed to the same general type as the fibula in Figure 10,²⁴ but it does not have an ornament in the round. The piece is distinguished by its enameling, which, in addition to two concentric stripes with stars, has a central disk with a chessboard design whose every square is treated in the millefiori technique. For Switzerland, especially, Ettlinger²⁵ mentioned the find of a fibula of this type in association with coins of the period of Emperor Commodus; it is then possible to propose an attribution to the end of the second century or to the third century if the possibility of a sufficiently long period of production is taken into account. Millefiori ornamentation otherwise constitutes, also as noted by Feugère,²⁶ the latest stage in the use of enameling for these pieces.

In spite of its few examples, the Museum's collection seems to encompass, as has been said above, most of the period of production and use of these fibulae. Very important phases are illustrated in the collection, such as the general usage of a hinge to attach the pin, the introduction of champlévé enamel ornamentation, and its zenith represented by the millefiori technique. (I shall return to these last points below.)

The presence of some examples (see Figures 1, 2)—numbers 66.152.4 (pelta fibula) and X.298.1, 2 (turtle fibulae)—underlines the improbable character of an earlier hypothesis, which proposed that Insular Bretons, who thus would have been the only ones to practice the art continuously since the Iron Age, transmitted an enameling technique to Continental populations. The Metropolitan fibulae we have discussed might well date from the second third or the second half of the first century, and similar objects are well attested on the Continent, while other enameled models of British origin did not reach there until about the year 100.

It is also necessary to take into account the discovery of an enameling workshop from the later LaTène period (first century B.C.) at Mont Beuvray, in central Gaul. This discovery makes it possible to concede that this type of ornamentation, with Celtic roots, had progressively been diffused in the Roman world throughout the first century A.D.²⁷ And it would be later, as Sabina Rieckhoff has proposed,²⁸ with the arrival in the West of glassmakers from eastern Mediterranean countries, that the millefiori technique would develop. This last supposition, however, still appears to be conjectural.

The “provincial” character of this craft can be referred, as several scholars have done,²⁹ to Philostratos.³⁰ At the beginning of the third century, he mentioned the use of items with a rich polychrome ornamentation—evidently enameled—by the “barbarians who were living near the Ocean.” The people of western Gaul and Britain appear to be the ones he meant, but these restricted locations should not be taken literally. In fact, centers of production for most of the enameled fibulae cannot yet be localized: only for some types (see Figure 6) may the numerous finds within a restricted area suggest, hypothetically, the existence of a workshop. Extreme caution is nevertheless necessary, since it should be recalled that a localization near Namur (Belgium) finally had to be given up in spite of a concentration of noteworthy finds.³¹

The Metropolitan Museum’s collection otherwise appears to be representative enough of an increasingly marked taste for sophisticated ornamentation throughout the first three centuries, as examples reveal. We have seen that enameling plays a major part, but these fibulae have also undergone modifications in shape so as to resemble jewels rather than plain, utilitarian pieces, as illustrated in Figure 9. This special interest in adornment is also underlined by the wearing of different types of fibulae, possibly in pairs, at the shoulder and at the neckline; this is clearly shown in the figures of women that appear on sepulchral stelae



Figure 10. Fibula. Champlevé enamel on bronze. H. 3.7 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917, 17.192.19

from Noricum and Pannonia in central Europe.³² It is also important to call attention to the fact that on these monuments the dead are always represented wearing native dress, never genuine Roman attire.³³

Ettlinger has also suggested that these fibulae might have been invested with a prophylactic function.³⁴ This use, as well as a votive one, seems to be corroborated by Dollfus’s observations in Normandy and Albert and

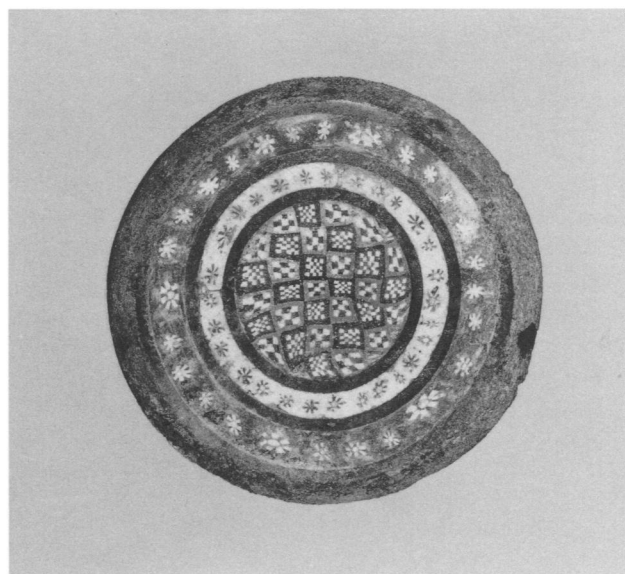


Figure 11. Fibula disk. Millefiori enamel on bronze, Diam. 4.5 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1966, 66.16

Fauduet's in central Gaul.³⁵ Indeed, numerous examples in central Gaul come from sanctuaries, where they appear to have been deposited as offerings. Many other fibulae from cremation burials also bear witness to this, as their perfect preservation implies that they were not burned with the body but were later placed in an urn along with the ashes. These considerations, beyond raising typological and chronological problems, now introduce us to the complex field of social and religious contexts, which should be explored in a future study of these fascinating objects.

NOTES

1. Michel Feugère, *Les fibules en Gaule méridionale de la conquête à la fin du V^e siècle après J.-C.* (Paris, 1985) p. 9 (and pp. 9–24 for a historical survey of the research and methodological questions).

2. I am grateful to Katharine R. Brown, organizer of the Museum's symposium, for asking me to participate in the symposium and encouraging me to publish this paper in the *MMJ*.

3. Oscar Almgren, *Studien über nordeuropäische Fibelformen der ersten nachchristlichen Jahrhunderte, mit Berücksichtigung der provinziäl-römischen und südrussischen Formen* (Leipzig, 1897).

4. Morin-Jean, "Les fibules de la Gaule romaine," in *Congrès préhistorique de France* (Tours, 1910) (Paris, 1911) pp. 803–835.

5. Ilona Kovrig, *Die Haupttypen der kaiserzeitlichen Fibeln in Pannonien* (Budapest, 1937); Ibolya Sellye, *Les bronzes émaillés de la Pannonie romaine*, appendix by Kurt Exner (Budapest, 1939); and Erzsébet von Patek, *Verbreitung und Herkunft der römischen Fibeltypen in Pannonien* (Budapest, 1942).

6. Kurt Exner, "Die provinziäl-römischen Emailfibeln der Rheinländer," in *29. Bericht der Römisch-Germanischen Kommission 1939* (1941) pp. 33–121.

7. Lucien Lerat, "Catalogue des collections archéologiques de Besançon II, Les fibules gallo-romaines," in *Annales littéraires de l'Université de Besançon*, 2nd ser., III, 1, *Archéologie* 3 (1956) pp. iii–viii, 1–52; idem, "Catalogue des collections archéologiques de Montbéliard: Les fibules gallo-romaines de Mandeure," in *ibid.*, XVI, *Archéologie* 4 (1957) pp. 10–28.

8. Marc-Adrien Dollfus, "Catalogue des fibules de bronze gallo-romaines de Haute-Normandie," in *Mémoires présentés par divers savants à l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres de l'Institut de France* 16 (1975) pp. 9–261.

9. Elisabeth Ettlinger, *Die römischen Fibeln in der Schweiz* (Bern, 1973).

10. Raymond Albert and Isabelle Fauduet, "Les fibules

d'Argentomagus," in *Revue archéologique du centre de la France* 15 (1976) pp. 46–74, 199–240.

11. Feugère, *Les fibules en Gaule*, pp. 335–350, esp. 340, 348–349 (variant of type 24d); for enameled examples, such as the one in the Morgan collection, see also Sophie de Ganay and Matthieu Pinette, "Le Vêtement et la parure," in *Autun-Augustodunum, capitale des Eduens*, exh. cat. (Autun, 1985) pp. 181–182, no. 336a–b.

12. Feugère, *Les fibules en Gaule*, pp. 357–368 passim (type 26 c 1 a).

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 331–335 (type 23).

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 382–416, esp. pp. 384–385 (type 29, especially 29 a 11).

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 357–368 (type 26, subgroup e).

16. Ettlinger, *Die römischen Fibeln*, pp. 116–118 (type 43).

17. Feugère, *Les fibules en Gaule*, pp. 357–368 passim (type 26, variant c 3 a) and p. 361, fig. 55, for the distribution map.

18. Waldemar Haberey, "Emailarbeiten," in *Aus rheinischer Kunst und Kultur. Auswahlkatalog des Rheinischen Landesmuseums Bonn* (Düsseldorf, 1963) p. 87, no. 43 h.

19. Dollfus, "Catalogue des fibules," p. 232, no. 525 R.

20. Albert and Fauduet, "Les fibules d'Argentomagus," p. 216, no. 140.

21. Sellye, *Les bronzes émaillés*, p. 79, pl. XIII, 21.

22. Ettlinger, *Die römischen Fibeln*, pp. 126–128 and pl. 14, no. 22.

23. Feugère, *Les fibules en Gaule*, pp. 368–372 (type 27 c).

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 368–372 (type 27).

25. Ettlinger, *Die römischen Fibeln*, pp. 121–123, type 45.

26. Feugère, *Les fibules en Gaule*, p. 364.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 363.

28. Sabina Rieckhoff, "Münzen und Fibeln aus dem Vicus des Kastells Hüfingen (Schwarzwald-Baar Kreis)," in *Saalburg Jahrbuch*, 32 (1975) p. 71 sq.

29. Among them, Sarnia Butcher, "Enamelling," in Donald Strong and David Brown, eds., *Roman Crafts* (London, 1976) p. 50.

30. Philostratos, *Imagines* I, 28; it should also be noted that the author mentions harness pieces and not fibulae.

31. Paule Spitaels, "La villa gallo-romaine d'Anthée, centre d'émaillerie légendaire," in *Helvinium X* (1970) pp. 209–241.

32. Jochen Garbsch, *Die norisch-pannonische Frauenracht im 1. und 2. Jahrhundert* (Munich, 1965) passim; see also Ettlinger, *Die römischen Fibeln*, p. 27.

33. For this fact, see also Astrid Böhme, "Tracht und Schmuck der Römerzeit," in *Die Römer in Schwaben*, exh. cat. (Augsburg, 1985) p. 117.

34. Ettlinger, *Die römischen Fibeln*, pp. 26–27.

35. Dollfus, "Catalogue des fibules," pp. 19–26, and Albert and Fauduet, "Les fibules d'Argentomagus," pp. 234–235.