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MICHEL KAZANSKI 

## THE MIGRATION OF THE VANDALS AND THE SUEBI TO THE ROMAN WEST AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ACCOUNTS

**Abstract:** This article addresses a few archaeological finds from the earliest stage of the Great Migration Period (late fourth to the first half of the fifth century AD) in the territory of the Western Roman Empire related to Central Europe by origin, which could testify to the migration of the Vandals and the Suebi to the Roman West in 406 AD. These finds comprise different types of crossbow brooches discovered in the Roman provinces in Gallia, Spain, and North Africa, which parallels originate from the lands to the north of the Danube, in the zone where the Vandals and the Suebi lived by the moment of the migration to the West in 406 AD. Besides, some features of the funeral rite discovered in the early Great Migration Period in Eastern Gallia, particularly ritually destroyed weapons, meet with analogies in the cemeteries of Central European barbarians, particularly in the Przeworsk culture. These archaeological pieces of evidence were partially related to the arrival of the Vandals and the Suebi to the Roman Empire's territory in 406 AD, and also reflected the presence of the Central European barbarians in the Roman military service.

**Keywords:** Vandals, Suebi, Great Migration Period, Western Roman Empire

This article will present a short review of archaeological finds from the earliest stage of the Great Migration Period (late fourth to the first half of the fifth century AD) in the territory of the Western Roman Empire (*Gallia, Hispania, Africa*), which origin was related to Central Europe, precisely to the region north of the Danube and the southern and middle Vistula basin. These finds have been frequently interpreted as an evidence of the migration of the Vandals and the Suebi in 406. However, it would be shown later that other interpretations are still possible.

Central European barbarians from the early Great Migration are well studied archaeologically. The researches have identified groups of antiquities in the Barbaricum north of the Danube, on either side of the Carpathians, which territories correspond to the *gentes* known from written sources, such as the Vandals and the Suebi. Despite possible heterogeneity of barbarian “peoples”,



these archaeological groups are culturally homogenous. It could be explained as a result of cohabitation of the populations that formed them within a single political, economic, cultural, and religious system, thus producing uniform archaeological material within one group or another. Later, this unity was reinforced by the creation of ethnogenetic legends of the joint origin of specific group. This unity allows archaeology to determine the cultural features of particular barbaric groups, especially in the areas not related to economic activities, where speedily spreading technical innovations were primarily reflected. Among these conservative and often sacralised elements there were funeral rite and elements of traditional woman's costume, which was well known to the ethnographers. These features lasted longer among the commonalty, since the ruling elite experienced great influence of prestigious international "princely fashion" primarily aimed at showing the high rank of barbaric leaders (for details see: Kazanski 1993). Therefore, this article almost omits the materials related to prestigious "princely culture" from the Great Migration Period.

Cultural features characterizing the population of the Barbaricum were partly continued among particular groups of migrants who moved into the Western Roman Empire during the Great Migration period (Kazanski, Périn 2008; 2009; 2017; Périn, Kazanski 2011). However, the migrants' culture still experienced deep transformation, which finally led to the acculturation and assimilation of the barbarians. The explanation is that these groups, first, incorporated most varied elements and, second, lost many cultural features not compatible with the migrants' new life and new neighbours. In case of the Vandals and the Suebi, we should bear in mind that in the Empire's territory they turned from the "people" with stable civilization to the "roaming army" Or, in other words, into a highly militarised group of heterogeneous origin, resembling many barbarians like the fifth-century Goths (for these, see: Rouche 1986; Kazanski 1991, 64–66). Obviously, these circumstances made the search for archaeological footprints of the Vandals and the Suebi a very complicated task. However, it seems that the distribution of some costume elements and funeral rite features in the Roman West could be related to the presence of people of Central European origin.

It is considered that ca. 400 AD the Vandals possessed the country to the east of the Middle Danube, in the area of modern eastern Hungary and Slovakia (Tejral 2000, 11, 24). The presence of the Vandals in this area was manifested in the second century AD by the distribution of the Przeworsk culture elements, most likely in result of the pressure of the Gothic expansion, which in the said period developed to the north and east of the Carpathians (Godłowski 1984; Istvánovits, Kulcsár 2017, 255–256). In the Late Roman and early Great Migration Periods, there existed a series of cemeteries such as Tapé-Malajdok, Tapé-Lebö, Csongrad, Tiszavalk, Tiszadob-Sziget, and Artand corresponding to a big concentration of barbarian populations, perhaps including the Vandals (see details in: Istvánovits,

Kulcsár 2017, 380–397, with bibliography). It was the time when the Suebi lived in modern Moravia, north-eastern Austria, and western Slovakia (Tejral 2000, 12–13; 2011, 91–125). It would be logical to suppose that archaeological artefacts originating from the said territories but found in the Roman West, as well as the local funeral rite features documented at the cemeteries in the Roman Empire's territory reflected the migration (or migrations) of the Vandals and the Suebi. Moreover, special attention should be paid to the artefacts of Central European origin dated to the period of the migration of the Vandals and the Suebi in 406–409 AD, i.e. the finds from the early Great Migration Period corresponding to Stage D1 of the European Barbaricum timeline (360/370–400/410 AD). Certainly, some of these artefacts continued to exist in the following Stage D2 (380/400–440/450 AD)<sup>1</sup>.

There are very few finds of the kind in the West, and even fewer in the Barbaricum territory, along the hypothetical migration route of the Vandals and the Suebi. Among these finds is the grave discovered in 1937 in Trebur (State of Hesse) which contained a pair of brooches, a necklace of beads, a bone comb, a belt end, buckles, and a ceramic vessel (Fig. 1.A) (Möller 1987, Taf. 104; Tejral 2000, 24–26, fig. 11: 2–15). One of these brooches, relatable to the types Almgren 158 and 173 (Fig. 1.A: 2), most likely originates from Moravia and Slovakia, where its parallels are well known in the context ca. 400 AD, in Zlechov, Sladkovičovo, Iža, and Kostelec (Tejral 2000, 26). Amber beads (Fig. 1.A: 7–11), some with engraved linear decoration, are also of Central European origin; in the Great Migration Period they were primarily distributed in the Middle Danube basin, as well as in the area between the Carpathians and the Baltic Sea (Mastykova 2001). The belt-end (Fig. 1.A: 14) meets with parallels dated to Stage C3–D1 of the European Barbaricum chronology (300/330–360/370 and 360/370–400/410 AD) in the area of Germanic Przeworsk and Wielbark cultures, in the Vistula basin, and also in the Western Balts antiquities (Madyda-Legutko 2011, 91, Map 23). Finally, the bone comb of the type Thomas III and brooches of the type Almgren 162 – Ambroz 16/2–1–2 (Fig. 1.A: 1, 13), which origin was related to the Eastern Germanic cultural tradition, were widely distributed to the West as far as the Atlantic Ocean (Kazanski 2016, 31–32).

## I. NORTHERN AND EASTERN GALLIA AND ROMAN GERMANIA

The artefacts of Central European origin dating to the late fourth and early fifth century are well known in Northern and Eastern Gallia and in Roman Germania along the left bank of the Rhine (Kazanski 1997, 285–292; 2000; Kleemann 2008,

<sup>1</sup> Here I use Jaroslav Tejral's chronology (Tejral 1988, 1997, 2011).

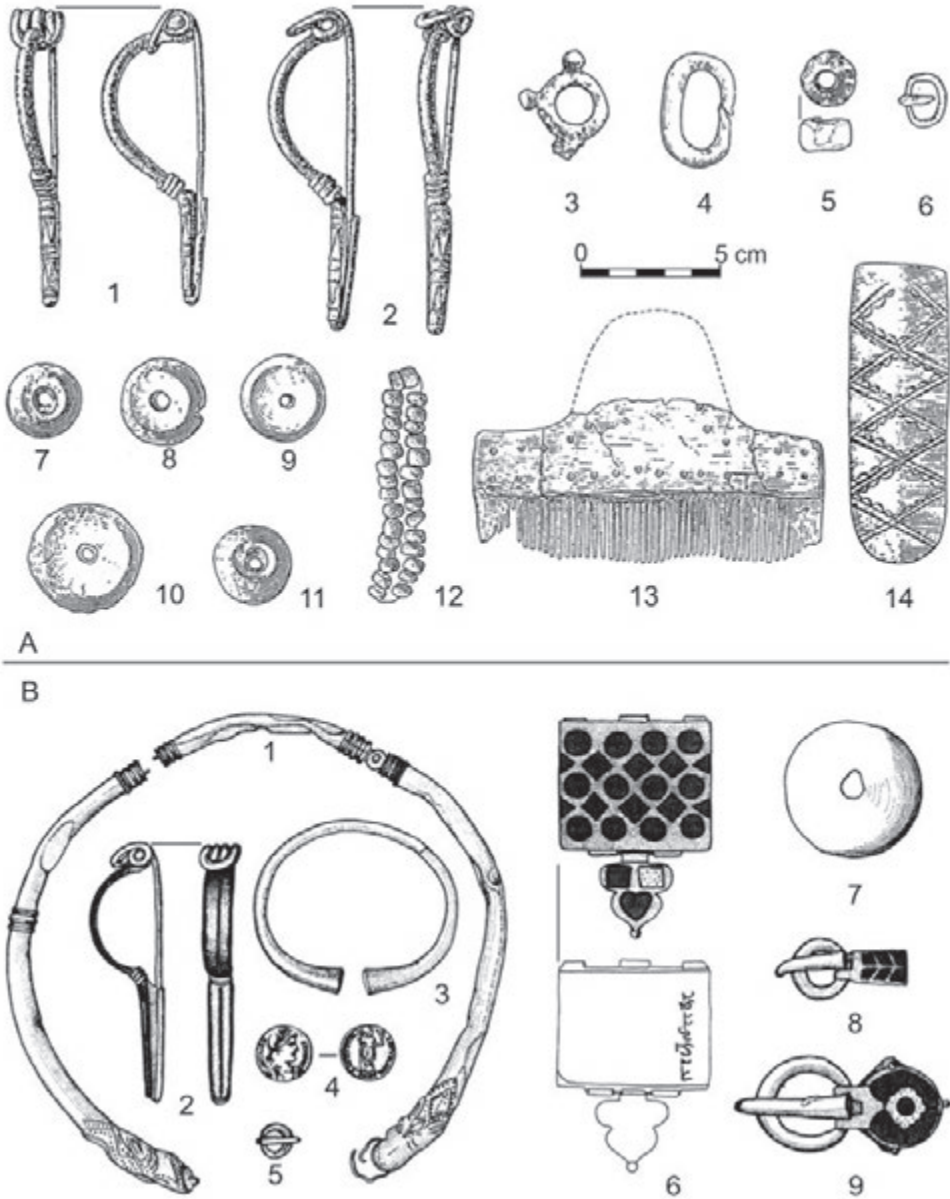


Fig. 1. The finds from the burial in Rhine area; 1.A: Trebur (acc. to: Tejral 2000, fig. 11: 2–15; 1.B: Wolfsheim (acc. to: Bernhard 1982, Abb. 15)

91–93) (Fig. 3.A). The presence of the Vandals and Suebi in the Rhine and Gallia in 406–409 AD is well documented by written sources. However, it would be heedless to relate all these finds to the invasion of 406 AD, for one should bear in mind that some groups or even separate persons of Central European barbaric origin could penetrate into the Roman territory, for example by entering the Roman army, as the case of Stilicho reminds us.

Among the finds of Central European origin is a big Central European brooch of the type Almgren 158 from the “princely” grave Wolfsheim (State of Rhineland-Palatinate), accompanied with a coin from 378 AD (Fig. 1.B: 3) (Behrens 1924, 73–74; Bernard 1982; *L’Or des princes barbares* 2000, N 15). The artefacts discovered in Wolfsheim generally reflect the international “princely” fashion of the *Untersiebenbrunn* horizon spread among the barbarians in the Hunnic Period (Kazanski 1996; Tejral 2011, 126–329), some of which were of Sasanian origin (Fig. 1.B: 6) (for details see: Quast, 1999). Concerning the brooches of the type Almgren 158, they are typical of the Germans in the Middle Danube area, primarily in modern Moravia, Slovakia, and Eastern Hungary, where the Vandals and Suebi lived (Kazanski 1990; 1997, Vallet 1993, 285; Istvánovits, Kulcsár 1999, fig. 11: 4). It should be underlined that this grave was located very close to the Roman border. Therefore, one tends to assume that the military commander buried in Wolfsheim was incorporated into the Roman system of defence at the Rhine border.

Perhaps some finds from Eastern Gallia testify to the presence of Central European Germanic barbarians in the Roman service (Kazanski 1997; 2009; Vallet 1993). Among them are inhumation burials discovered in Neuilly, Crimolois, and Bretenièrre (Department of Côte d’Or) (Fig. 2). These burials contained weapons and horse trappings, particularly swords, spears, shield bosses, and horse bits. Burials in Bretenièrre also contained a coin of Jovianus (setting their *terminus post quem* in 411 AD). Two big Central European brooches of the type Almgren 158, similar to the find in Wolfsheim (see above), were among the grave goods of the burial in Crimolois (Fig. 2.C: 15,16). In Eastern Gallia, two similar brooches occurred in Alésia and Wolfsheim (Fig. 1.B: 3; 2.D: 25). Graves in Eastern Gallia also contained the buckles from Stages D1–D2 (360/370–400/410 and 380/400–440/450 AD), featuring circular frame and long turned-down tongue (Fig. 2.C: 20–24). Although buckles of the kind rarely occur in Gallia, they are well known in Eastern and Central Europe. Finally, shield bosses in these graves were intentionally broken (Fig. 2.B: 4; 2.C.13–14). The ritual when weapons were deliberately damaged before placement into grave is well documented among Germanic residents of Central Europe, particularly in the cemeteries of the Przeworsk culture, which was – at least partially – related to the Vandals.

There is doubtless similarity between the burials in Neuilly, Crimolois, and Bretenièrre on the one hand and the graves of barbarians in Central Europe.



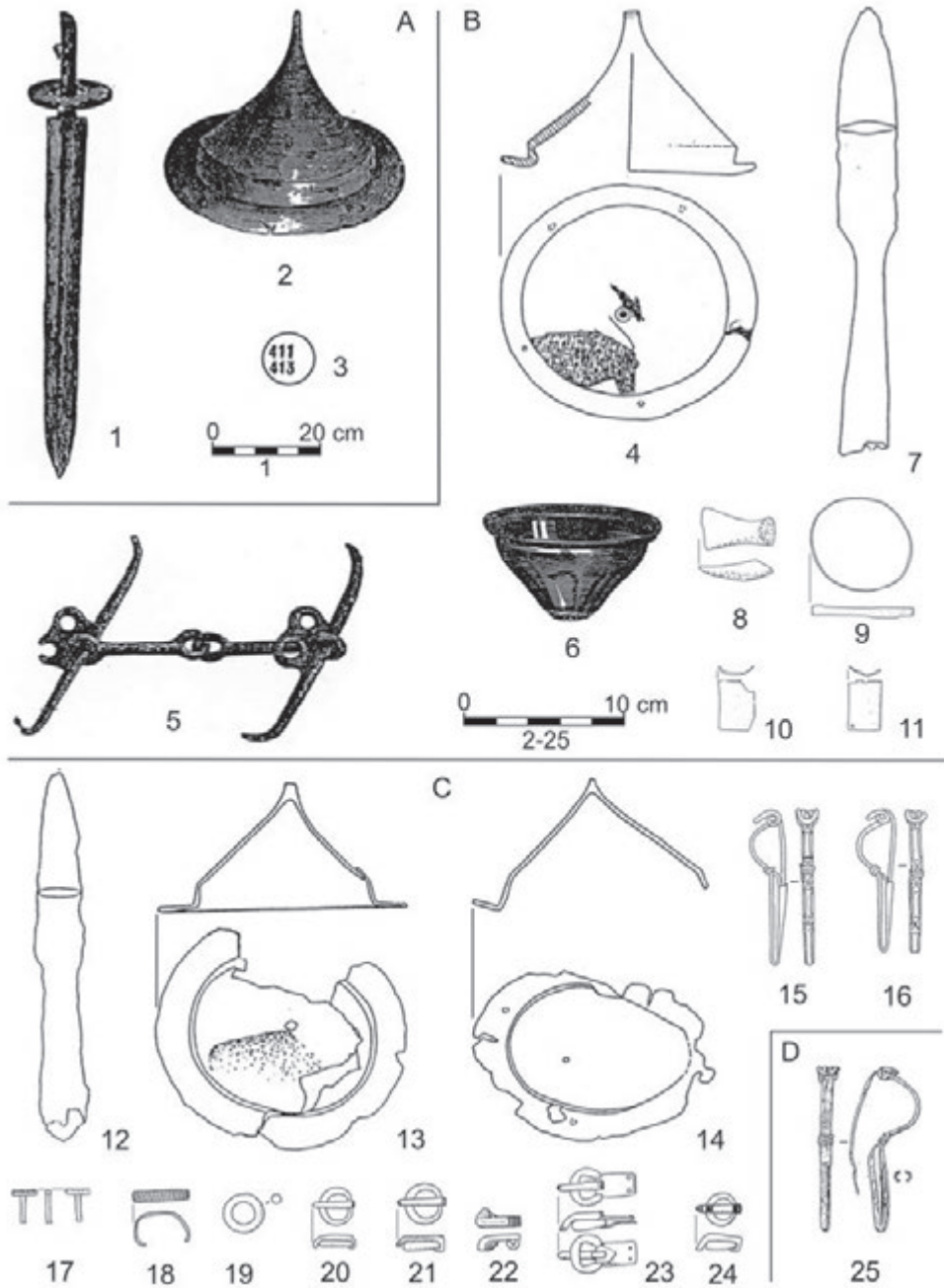


Fig. 2. The finds from Eastern Gallia; 2.A: Bretenière; 2.B: Neuilly; (3–10); 2.C: Crimolois; 2.D: Alesia (acc. to: Kazanski 1997, fig. 1-3)

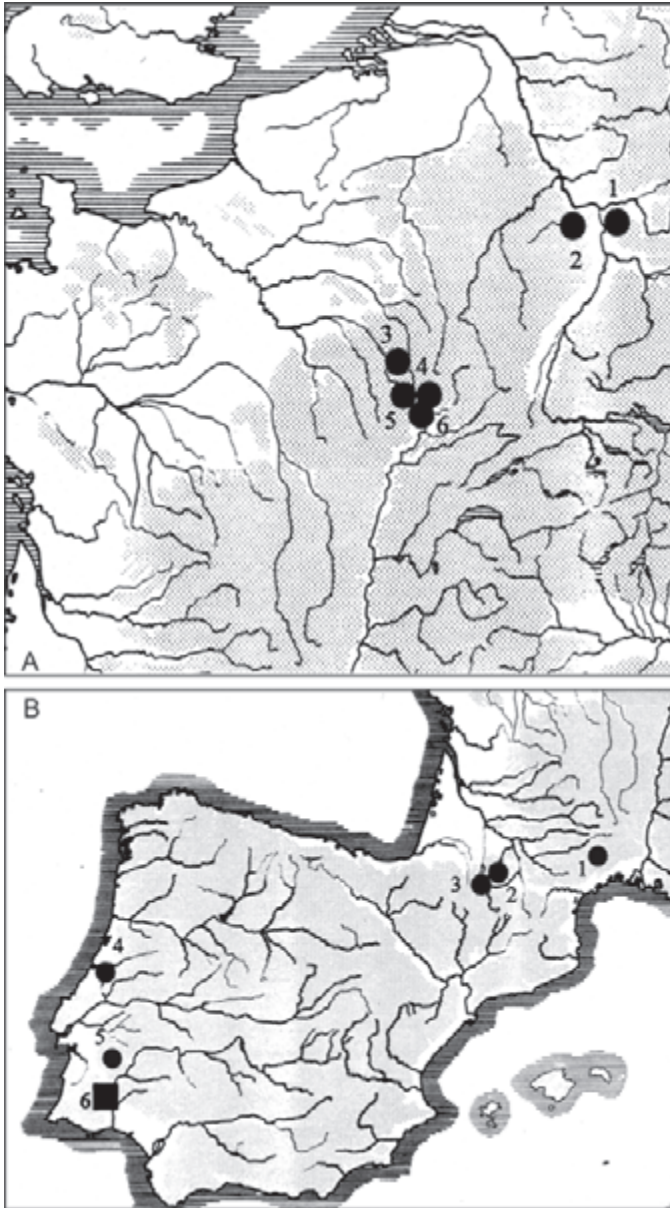


Fig. 3. The finds of the Central European origin in the Gallia and Spain;  
 3.A: Rhine area and in Eastern Gallia – 1: Trebur; 2: Wolfsheim; 3: Alésia; 4: Crimolois;  
 5: Neuilly; 6: Brettenière; 3.B: Southern Gallia and Spain – 1: Saint-Etienne de Gourgas;  
 2: Montmaurin; 3: Valentine; 4: Conimbriga; 5: Sta.-Vitoria do Ameixial; 6: Beja.

Due to the scale of the maps, geographical location of the finds is tentative



There are Germanic sites from the Great Migration Period, particularly the cemeteries in the Upper Tisza area and Transylvania, such as Budești, Csongrád-Bersenyi, Nagyvársany, Șimleul-Silvaniei, Tiszadob-Sziged, Tiszavalk, Ujhartyán, Ártánd, Horgos, much resembling the finds in Gallia, both by the funeral rite (inhumation) and the composition of grave goods (Kazanski 1997, 285–286). At least a part of these Middle Danube sites belonged to the Vandals. Most likely, the Vandals together with other barbarian tribes entered the Roman service, so they were entrusted with the task of controlling inner areas of Gallia (Vallet 1993, 252).

## II. SOUTHERN GALLIA

Another zone of concentration of artefacts originating from the Barbaricum to the north of the Danube has been documented in South-Western Gallia (Fig. 3.A). There are crossbow brooches (Fig. 4.A: 1–3) originating from villa Montmaurin, Lassales (Department of Haute-Garonne), from villa Valentine, Arnesp (Department of Haute-Garonne), and Saint-Etienne de Gourgas (Department of Hérault). These clasps were identified as originating from Moravia or Slovakia and dating to the early fifth century (Schulze-Dörrlamm 1986, 693–694; Kazanski 1995, 168–171; 1999, 17; Pinar Gil 2017, 538–544). They actually meet with analogies from Germanic sites in the Middle Danube area, attributed to the Suebi and the Vandals. However, as far as one can see from the ancient authors' accounts, the Suebi and the Vandals resided in Southern Gallia for a very short time only, so they probably did not leave archaeologically recognisable traces. Therefore, one can infer that there was a group of Vandals or Suebi that joined the Visigoths who settled in Aquitania for long, from 419 AD.

## III. SPAIN<sup>2</sup>

There is a series of Central European crossbow brooches discovered in the Pyrenean Peninsula, where the Vandals and the Suebi were known as settlers from 409 AD (Perez Rodriguez Aragon 1997, 633–634; Kazanski 2000; Pinar, Ripoll 2008, 109) (Fig. 3.B). There exist four variants of these brooches.

Two brooches of the first variant have the catch-plate equal to the foot-plate length. One of these brooches originates from Sta.-Vitoria do Ameixial (District of Evora) in Southern Portugal (Fig. 4.A: 4). Another brooch was discovered

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<sup>2</sup> Henceforth I will discuss the Roman diocese including the area of modern Portugal.

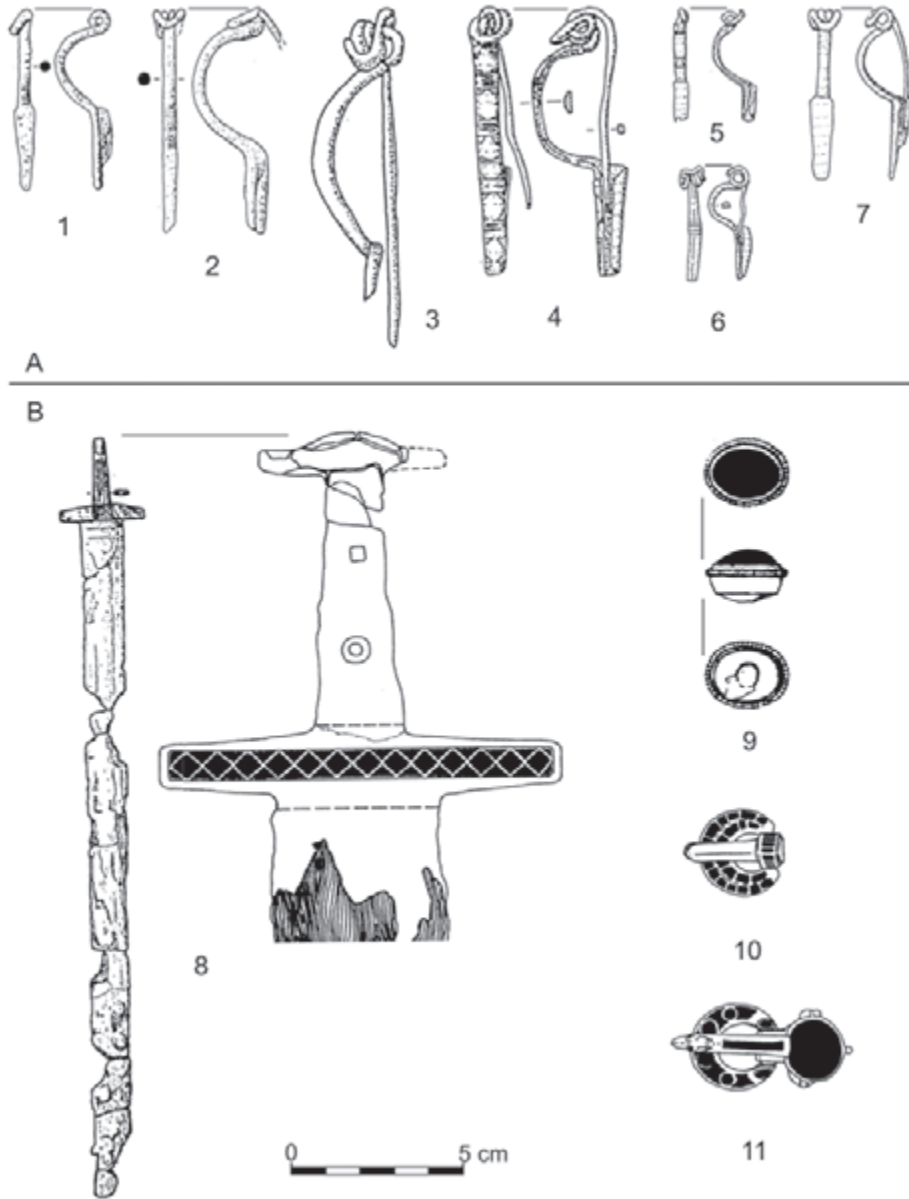


Fig. 4. The finds of the Central European origin in Southern Gallia and Spain.

4.A: Brooches of the Central European origin in Southern Gallia and Spain – 1: Montmaurin; 2: Valentine; 3: Saint-Etienne de Gourges; 4: Sta.-Vitoria de Amexia; 5–7: Conimbriga (acc. to: Kazanski 2000, fig 4: 8–12, 14); 4.B: The artefacts from the burial in Beja (according to: Perez Rodriguez-Aragon 1997, fig. 5

in Conimbriga (District of Coimbra) in Central Portugal, in the uppermost layer of the street going to the forum, dated to the fifth century AD (Fig. 4A: 6). These brooches meet with numerous parallels in the antiquities from the Late Roman and Great Migration Periods in the territory of current Moravia, Slovakia, and Lower Austria (Kazanski 2000, 189, with bibliography of the Portuguese finds).

The second variant features a brooch originating from Conimbriga (Fig. 4.A: 5). Its foot-plate is wider than the bow. Similar brooches are also typical of the territory of modern Moravia, Lower Austria, and Eastern Hungary in Stages C3, D1, and D2 (corresponding to 300/330–360/370, 360/370–400/410, and 380/400–440/450 AD) (Istvánovits, Kulcsár 1999, fig. 11: 1; Pollak 1999, Taf. 3: 5; Kazanski 2000, 189, 190, with bibliography of the Portuguese finds).

One more brooch from Conimbriga belongs to the third variant. Its foot-plate flares at the top, and the catch-plate is shorter than the foot-plate (Fig. 4.A: 7). This artefact resembles the above-mentioned brooch from villa Montmaurin in Southern Gallia, (Fig. 4.A: 1, see above). Danubian origin of these brooches is beyond any doubt, and their most close parallels originate from the territory of modern Eastern Hungary and Slovakia (Kazanski 1999, 17; 2000, 190, with bibliography).

Therefore, it is possible to point out that parallels to the above-mentioned crossbow brooches concentrate mainly in the area, which in the Early Great Migration Period was occupied by the Suebi (modern Moravia, Upper Austria, and Slovakia) and the Vandals (Eastern Hungary and Slovakia). This way, their appearance in the Pyrenean Peninsula could be explained as the migration of the Suebi and the Vandals to the West in 406–409 AD (Kazanski 2000, 190).

More complicated is the case with a “princely” grave in Beja (in the district of the same name) in Southern Portugal (Fig. 4.B). This inhumation was made into the cemetery of the Roman city of *Pax Iulia*, in a tile grave. The burial contained a sword and two gold buckles decorated with cellular incrustation (Raddatz 1959; Dannheimer 1961; Koenig, 1981, 346–350; Palma Santos 2008). This grave has been attributed to a Vandal (Koenig 1981, 346–350). The sword of the “Asiatic type” with iron cross-guard (Menghin 1995) dates the burial to Stage D2/D3 (430/440–460/470 AD), since this was the period of distribution of swords with iron cross-guards through Central and Western Europe (Tejral 1997a, 147). However, in this case the grave appears to be later than the Vandals’ migration from Spain to Africa in 429 AD (Kazanski 2009, 432). Generally, in fifth-century “princely” inhumation graves featuring parade swords widely spread from the Caucasus to the Atlantic Ocean. It is not possible to determine the ethnicity of the buried persons because these burials contained similar grave goods, typical of the international “princely” fashion from the Hunnic and Post-Hunnic Periods (Kazanski 1996; 1999a).

## IV. NORTH AFRICA

It is known that the Vandals came to North Africa in 429 AD. There is a group of finds (Fig. 5.A), primarily fifth-century graves, featuring prestigious grave goods and usually interpreted as Vandalic or at least related to the age of the Vandalic Kingdom in Africa ( Ben Abed 2008, Eger 2001; 2008; Koenig 1981; Quast 2005; von Rummel 2000; 2008, 158–164;). Their analysis is not the task of this article, so let us address only the finds of Central European origin. Similarly with the Pyrenean Peninsula, this group comprises crossbow brooches discovered in the territory of modern Tunisia in Thuburbo-Majus/ Henchir-Kasbat (administrative district of Zaghuan), Koudiat-Zateur (administrative district of Tunis), and Douar-ech-Chott (administrative district of Tunisia) (Fig. 5.B; 6.A-B).

Two of these graves, in Thuburbo-Majus (Merlin 1912, 360; Merlin, Lantier 1922, 115; Koenig 1981, 310–312; Ghalia 2008) and Douar-ech-Chott (Eger 2001, 371–376; 2009), contained cast crossbow brooches with long catch-plate. One pair of brooches has the end of the bow turned like a loop to hold the spring of the pin (Fig. 6.B: 8, 9), another pair of clasps has the pin made as a projection of the brooch body (Fig. 6.A: 4, 6). Besides, there is another crossbow brooch from Algeria (Eger 2008, Abb. 2: 3) (Fig. 6.C). Since crossbow brooches of the types are known in the Late Roman and the Great Migration Periods in Central Europe, Moravia in particular (Eger 2008, 187–189, Kazanski 2000, 190–191), there are reasons to relate the African finds with the barbarians originating from the Middle Danube area.

One more crossbow brooch was found in Koudiat-Zateur (Ben Abed 2008; Koenig 1981, 308 – 309; Merlin, Lantier 1922, 114 – 116). It is made of gold, with the bow decorated in relief (Fig. 5.B: 13). Its parallels are known in modern Slovakia (Kazanski 2000, 190)<sup>3</sup>.

Finally, it is important to mention a T-shaped brooch originating from Djemila (administrative district of Sétif) in Algeria (Fig. 5.C). It could be interpreted as a derivative of Germanic type of Wiesbaden from the first half of the fifth century AD. Among its probable parallels is the brooch from Mainz - Kastel, discovered in a hoard of coins dated to 408 – 411 AD (R.-Alföldi, Quast 2018, 155, Taf. 1: 4a), and also brooches discovered in Ksinna and Selce, Slovakia. The spring system of the brooch from Djemila resembles brooches from Świlcza, Poland, and Wulfen, Germany. The bow of the African brooch is similar to bows of the brooches of

<sup>3</sup> Rich grave goods of women's graves in Thuburbo-Majus/Henchir-Kasbat, Koudiat-Zateur, and Douar-ech-Chott is typical of international "princely" culture from the first half of the fifth century AD; therefore, they could not be related to this or that specific people (Kazanski 1996; Kazanski, Mastykova 2003). However, numerous elements of attire does not allow us to interpret these burials as graves of Roman nobility; the latter typically contained almost no ornaments and costume fittings. Paired brooches indicate that the former graves belonged to persons of Eastern Germanic origin (see: Tempelmann-Maczyńska 1989), plausibly Vandals.

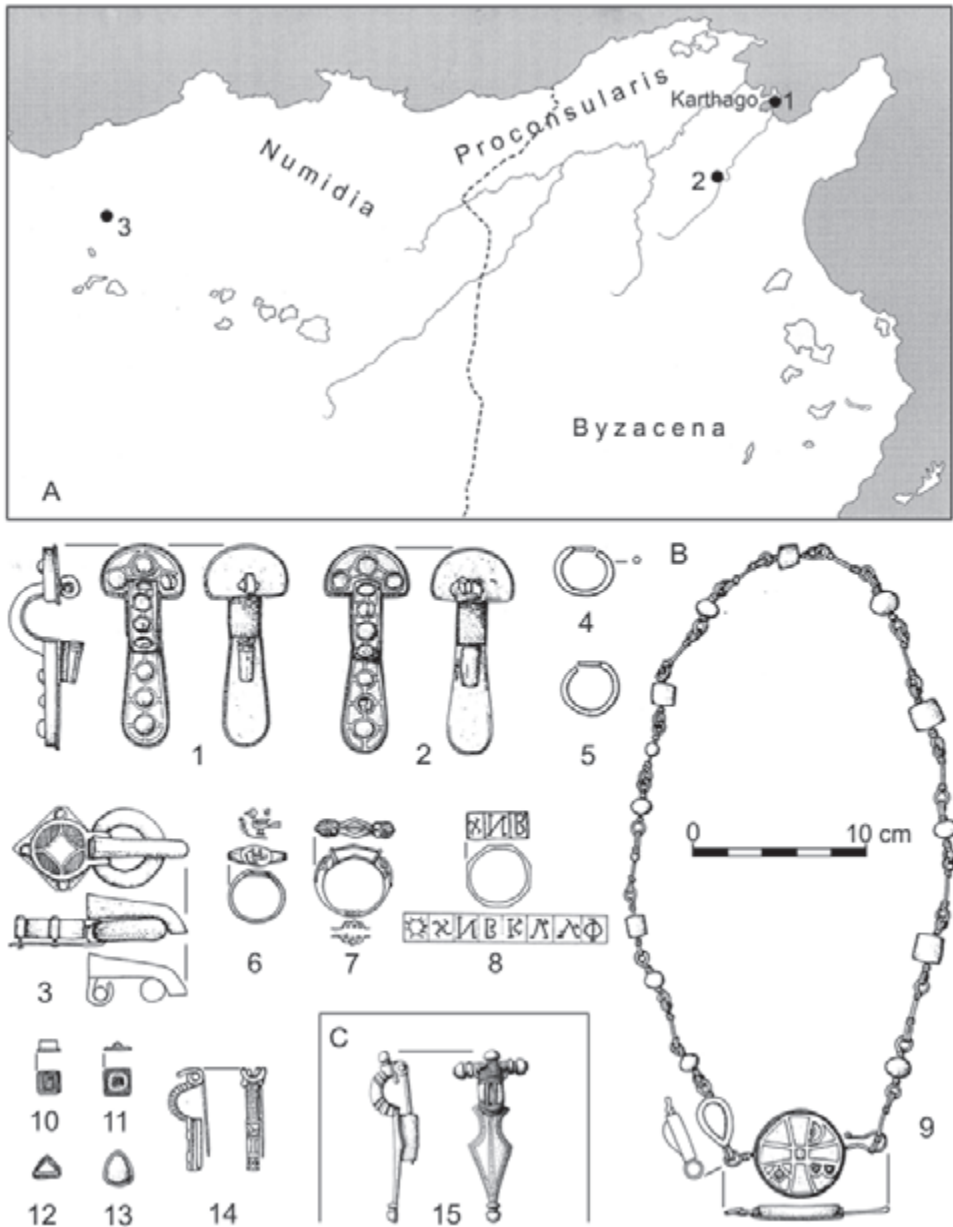


Fig. 5. The finds of the Central European origin in the North Africa:  
 5.A – 1: Kudiat-Zateur and Douar-ech-Chott (Carthage); 2: Thuburbo-Majus; 3: Djamila  
 (acc. to Eger 2008, Abb. 5); 5.B – Kudiat-Zateur (acc. to Eger 2001, Abb. 4, 5); C – Djamila  
 (acc. to Eger 2008, Abb. 3)

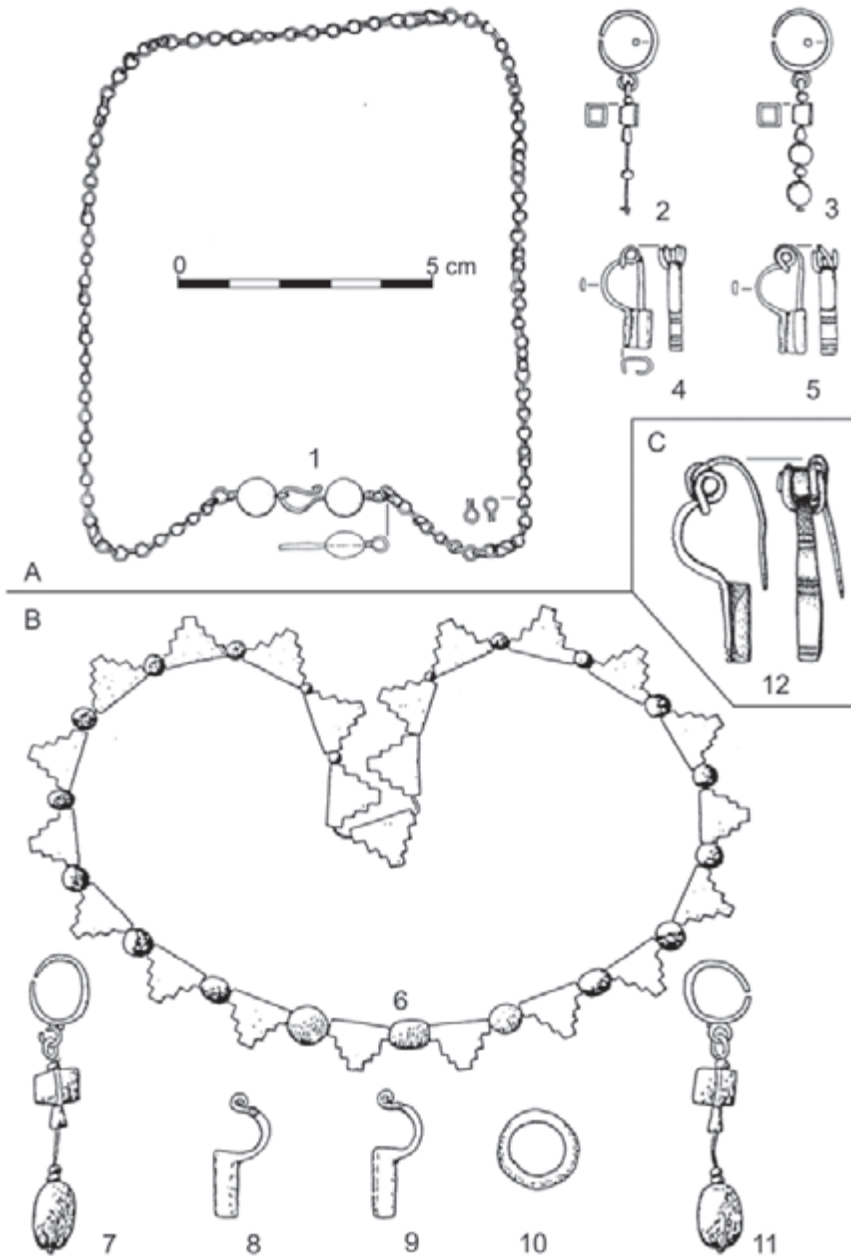


Fig. 6. The artefacts from burials in Douar-ech-Chott (A), Thuburbo-Majus (B), and the brooch from Algeria (C); (1–6: acc. to: Eger 2001, Abb. 9; 6–11: acc. to: Koenig 1981, Abb. 6; 12: acc. to: Eger 2008, Abb. 2: 3)



the type Ulm from South-Western Germany dated to the first half of the fifth century AD (Kazanski 2000, 192; Eger 2008, 189–190; R.-Alföldi, Quast 2018, 88–92). Generally, this set of parallels allows to suppose the connection between the Djemila brooch and the Vandals.

\* \* \*

Thus, the finds of Central European origin in the Roman West concentrated primarily in Gallia, Spain, and North Africa. It is easier to recognise fittings of woman's attire because, as it has already been stated, woman's costume is actually more "ethnographical" in traditional societies than man's. The finds of these artefacts are scattered through a large area. One can suppose that they appeared there in connection to certain historical events and processes, such as the migration of the Vandals and the Suebi to the West, and their participation in the defence of the Western Roman Empire.

*Translated from Russian by Nikita Khrapunov*

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