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BROOCHES WITH MEDALLIONS: *INSIGNIA* AND *LARGITIONES* OR JUST ADORNMENTS?

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Abstract

A number of cruciform brooches have been found in south-eastern Europe over the last half century. Typical of their ornamentation are medallions with portraits of young men. The facial features are rough and schematic. The general opinion of scholars is that the youthful draped figures are representations of members of the Constantinian dynasty, which is in opposition to their typological and chronological evolution. These brooches are the product of a common art industry (*Kunstindustrie*), connected with many aspects of the imitative arts. *Imagines clipeatae* on the brooches as well as those on silverware are the result of the translation of ornaments between the various products of late antique art.

During the second half of the last century a group of brooches remarkable for their decoration has filled museum collections in south-eastern Europe, especially Bulgaria. Their special features are a cross-shaped bow form with large proportions and onion-shaped knobs on the ends and the centre of the cross-bar wing. In these peculiarities they belong to the group of the onion-head brooches (*Zwiebelknopffibeln*), which is one of the most typical forms of the 4th and the first half of the 5th century AD. All composing elements are hollow and mould. The decoration is engraved over the surface of the bow and the footplate. The cut out lines are filled with more or less qualitative *niello*, as a rule the whole form is gilt. Typical of the ornamentation are medallions with portraits of young men (*imagines clipeatae*). According to the known and published examples, their number ranges from one to ten. The facial features are rough and schematic without aspiration for personality. Usually the vista is half leftwards or to the right. Other elements of the decoration are various waves, intended lines or geometrical patterns.

According to the proportions and form, these brooches are of Keller's types 5 and 6, dated mainly between AD 350 and 380.¹ Other typical features are the solid bow and foot that permits more varied decoration than other types of *Zwiebelknopffibeln*. The pairs of volutes in relief on the footplate-rim echo the earlier Keller type 4 that could be considered as the prototype.

¹ Keller 1971, 140.

Among the brooches from the Lower Danube area the number of portrait medallions varies between six and one. Six images are represented on the bow and foot-plate of the brooch from Cherna Gora, Chirpan district (Fig. 1.1-3). It was found in a tomb with a belt-buckle and glass vessels (the first report was published by T. Iliicheva,² but, in the context of more recent finds, it was re-examined at the symposium '2000 Years of Christianity', held in October 2002 at Sandanski). Five medallions adorn the brooches from the North Cemetery of Augusta Traiana (Fig. 1.4) and the accidental find from Chomakovtsi-Zetnocurtu;³ four an example from the cemetery in 'Strazhata' near Pleven (Fig. 1.5);⁴ three on brooches from Yagodin Mala near Naissus (Fig. 1.6), Kozlodui-Regianum (Fig. 1.7), and on a piece of unknown origin. (Fig. 2.1).⁵ There are two medallions on the brooch from the Odessos cemetery⁶ and that from an unknown site in Serbia,⁷ and one portrait on the examples from 'Strazhata'⁸ and Kolartsi⁹ (Keller's type 6) (Fig. 2.2-3).

The interpretation of the images is important both for the whole discussion about the date of this type of fibula and for the problem of ornamental schemes and pattern transference between different kinds of art production. In 1959 R. Laur-Belart suggested for the first time that three medallions on a brooch from a grave in the vicinity of Basel are representations of Constantine the Great's sons Constantine II, Constantius II and Constans.¹⁰ T. Ivanov drew a general conclusion from some pieces in present-day Bulgaria and has given an interpretation to the medallions as images of some members of Constantine's dynasty. According to his investigations, the brooches from Augusta Traiana and Chomakovtsi-Zetnocurtu are the earliest pieces. The five medallions contain representations of Constantine the Great and his sons Crispus, Constantine II, Constantius II and Constans. He supposed a date of manufacture not later than AD 326, as the reason is Constantine's *vicennialium*.¹¹ The connection between the historical persons and the representations is based on detailed analysis of other fine arts products with similar images – glass vessels, small bone and stone plastics, mosaics. The principal iconographical analogies, used by

² Iliicheva 1960, 23.

³ Ivanov 1972, 10-13, figs. 2-4; 13-15, figs. 5-7.

⁴ Tabakova-Tsanova 1981, 121, fig. 6.2.

⁵ Tabakova-Tsanova 1981, 136, fig. 6.1; Ivanov 1972, 16-18, figs. 12-13; Jovanović 1975, 237 n. 7, sl. 5; 1976, 43, sl. 1-2; 1978, 65, k. br. 52, sl. 127; Drča 1993, 305 n. 104; Popović 2001, 222; Ivanov 1972, 15-16, figs. 7-10.

⁶ Haralambieva 1990, 95 n. 38, tabs. 5-6.

⁷ Popović 2001, 152 n. 88.

⁸ Tabakova-Tsanova 1981, 121, fig. 6.2.

⁹ Ivanov 1972, 18, figs. 14-15.

¹⁰ Laur-Belart 1959, 57.

¹¹ Ivanov 1972, 22.

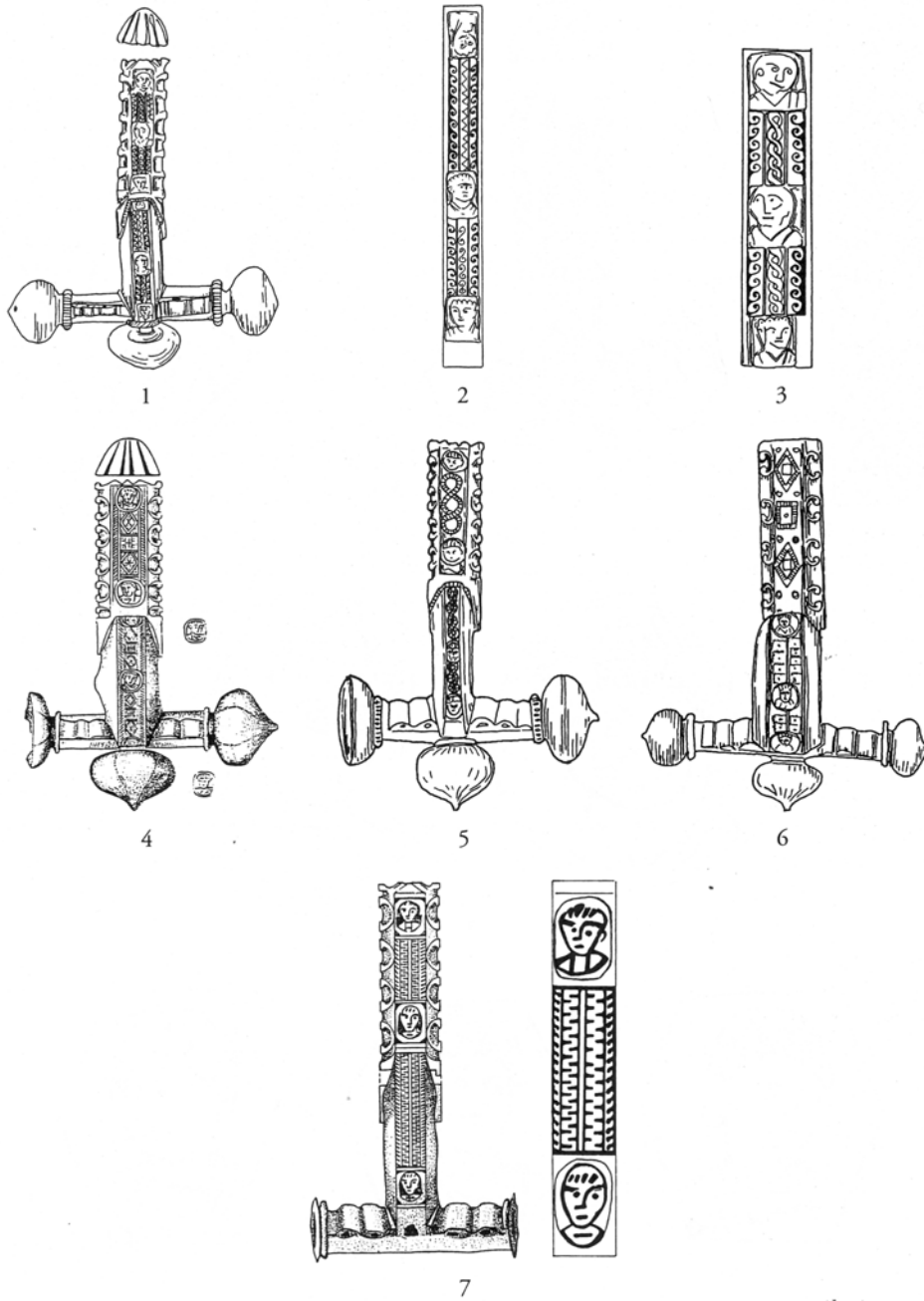


Fig. 1: 1. Brooch from Cherna Gora; 2. Brooch from Cherna Gora (detail from foot); 3. Brooch from Cherna Gora (detail from bow); 4. Brooch from Augusta Traiana (adapted from Ivanov 1972). 5. Brooch from 'Strazhata' near Pleven; 6. Brooch from Yagodin Maala near Naissus (adapted from Jovanović 1978). 7. Brooch from Kozlodui-Regianum and detail from the foot (adapted from Ivanov 1972).

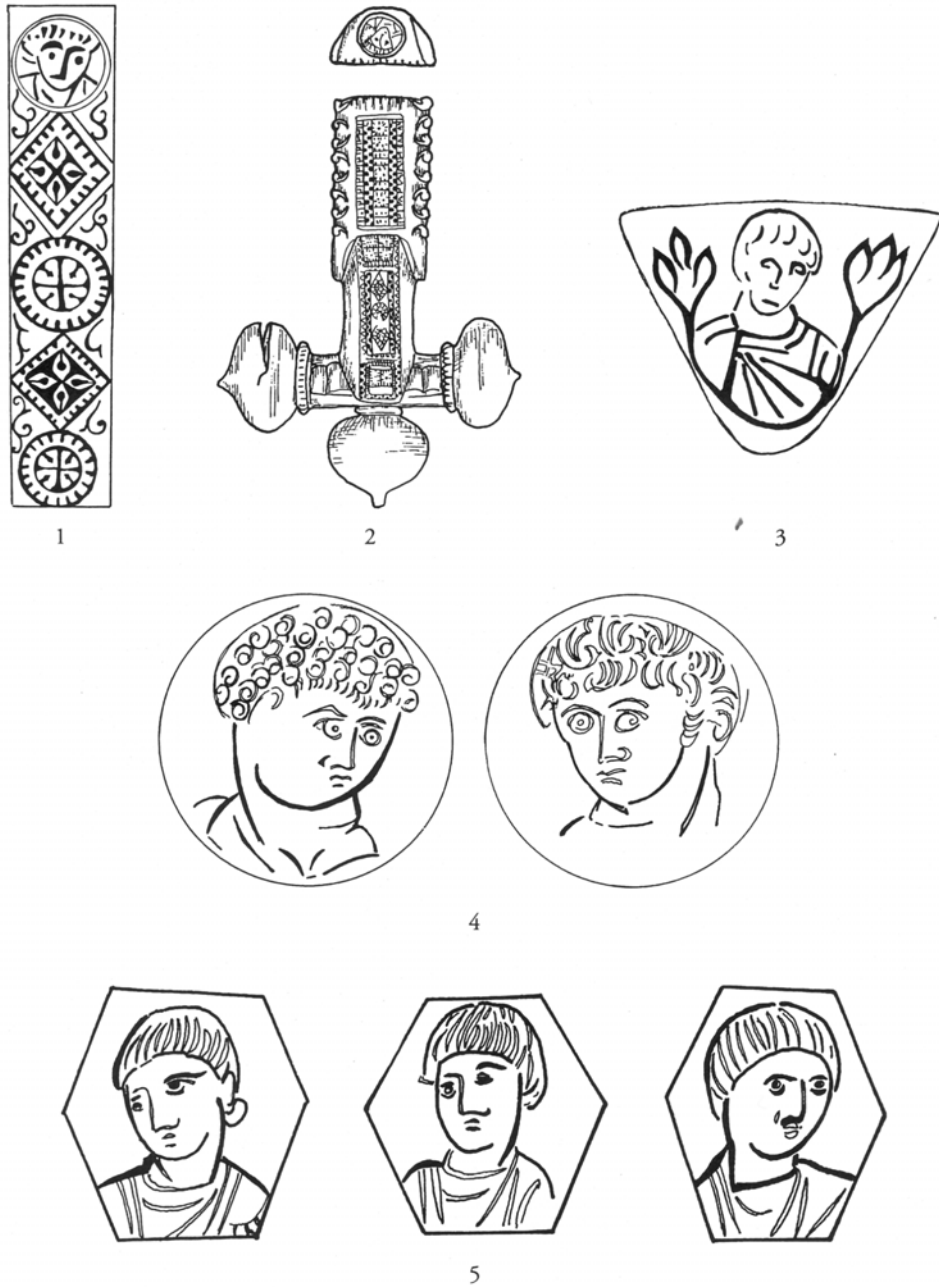


Fig. 2: 1. Detail from brooch-foot of unknown origin (adapted from Ivanov 1972). 2. Brooch from 'Strazhata' near Pleven; 3. Detail from brooch-foot from Kolartsi; 4. Ornaments from lid of 'animal ewer', Sevso treasure (adapted from Mango and Bennett 1994). 5. Ornaments from body of 'animal ewer', Sevso treasure (adapted from Mango and Bennett 1994).

Ivanov were the floor mosaics in the South Church under the cathedral of Aquileia (Fig. 5).¹² These are five mosaic portraits, situated immediately next Victoria, recognised by H. Kähler as representations of Constantine the Great and his four sons.¹³ However, their situation on the floor of the building makes their identification as 'Constantinian princes' questionable.¹⁴

In the same way, Ivanov gave an interpretation to the three medallions on the brooch from Kozlodui-Regianum and on the one with unknown origin as representations of Constantine II, Constantius II and Constans, and, basing his arguments on their maturity, dated the manufacture between AD 326 and 337.¹⁵ The brooches with one medallion are also said to have imperial images. Other East European scholars followed this point of view: A. Jovanović in regard to the brooch from Jagodin Mala, also I. Popović; and until now it has been the common assumption in Bulgarian archaeological publications.¹⁶ An exception is the recent study by E. Gencheva, but without any solid argument.¹⁷

As Ivanov noted correctly, interpretation of the representations would fix the date of these brooches and they could serve as an exact chronological indicator.¹⁸ In this way the *terminus post quem* is the end of the third or beginning of the fourth decade of the 4th century. However, no finds with clear archaeological context support any such suggestion. According to some examples, dated with coins from cemeteries in Pannonia at Ságvár,¹⁹ Somodor and Kisáprás,²⁰ and in Raetia at Andernach and Krefeld-Gellep²¹, the main range of these brooches is between AD 350 and 380. The latest pieces were also grave-goods – the Abbeville-Hombelières brooch was found with a buckle of Hermes-Loksted type from the early 5th century.²² Undoubtedly the well-known brooch with medallions from Basel must also be assigned to around AD 400, along with buckle of the same type.²³

¹² Ivanov 1972, 23.

¹³ Kähler 1962, 11, figs. 1-6.

¹⁴ According to some views the original function of that building was civil, not as a church. The edicts of the *Codex Theodosianus* and *Codex Iustinianus* do not allow imperial images to be placed on the floor (*Codex Iustinianus* I.8; Engemann 1988, 1013).

¹⁵ Ivanov 1972, 26. According to the data from the published specimens the number of images on some Pannonian brooches reach ten (Grave 114 from Ságvár [Burger 1966, 144]). They could represent the whole of Constantine the Great's dynasty, including Constantius I Chlorus and Julian (Laur-Belart 1959, 66, fig. 44.5-8), though this may be over interpretation.

¹⁶ Popović 2001, 222; Tabakova-Tsanova 1981, 136; Haralambieva 1990, 94.

¹⁷ Gencheva 2004, 65.

¹⁸ Ivanov 1972, 27.

¹⁹ Burger 1966, 124-25, figs. 113, 124.

²⁰ Keller 1971, 41.

²¹ Keller 1971, 41.

²² Böhme 1974, 82, Taf. 112.2, 7.

²³ Laur-Belart 1959, 57, Abb. 37, 40.

The absence of any agreed view about the images and their interpretation by such leading investigators as I. Kovrig, E. Keller and P.M. Prötel is suggestive.²⁴ The largest number of this type of decorated fibula is known from complexes in Pannonia. The authors declined to offer any interpretation of the images, dating them clearly in the second half of the 4th century.²⁵

Brooches of Keller's types 5 and 6, decorated with portrait medallions, date to the second half of the 4th century; hence the idea of a connection with some members of the Constantine dynasty is invalid. The evolution of the shape demonstrates clearly that the earlier specimens are smaller in size, more modestly decorated and made of consistent metal. The 'classical' forms appear about the second half of 4th century with the largest incidence of Keller's types 3 and 4, whose most characteristic features are the well-shaped 'onions' and enlarged lower part of the footplate. The brooches of type 5 are products of this evolution with proportional extension and rich decoration. In this sense, the explanation that, regardless of all later analogies of these brooches, they had a long life and were in use from the 320s to the end of the 4th century AD with unmodified pattern is hardly acceptable.²⁶ The idea, they had been a personal imperial *largitio*, delivered for merit, declines the possibility for them being worn and being placed in the graves of later generations.

Undoubtedly onion-like gold or gilt brooches, inscribed with names of emperors and their appellations, were imperial *largitio*. The adornments with medallions would be connected also with this tradition, as the images replaced inscriptions and invocations. However no image or representation has any marks of the imperial iconography of power or its attending inscriptions.

A review of the bibliography shows that in the past these representations have been interpreted variously by some leading specialists in late antique art as the images of bishops²⁷ or saints.²⁸ Neither is acceptable because, regardless of the development of the cult of saints in the 4th century, we are still at an early stage in the construction of saints' iconography. Saints are not yet real figures in religious art. Take, for example, the decoration of Santa Constanza in Rome, where youthful images and

²⁴ Prötel determines this group as transitional between 3/4 C and 5, while Keller classifies them as type 5. Neither author dates the brooches earlier than the middle of the 4th century (Keller 1971, 53; Prötel 1988, 364-65).

²⁵ Kovrig 1937, Taf. XXXIV.1-3, 7; Burger 1966, 142-44.

²⁶ Ivanov 1972, 26.

²⁷ Cabrol and Leclercq 1923, 1490; 1936.

²⁸ Heurgon 1958, 25-26. His attitude to these brooches is based on the Christianity, relating their cruciform shape to Christianisation, thus opposing the earlier functional origin to the later decorative one. Although Heurgon presents no explanation for his idea, it is possible that his assumption derived from the 6th-century images of the Apostles in medallions from San Vitale in Ravenna.

pastoral scenes are still the main element in Christian decorative symbolism and the imagery of heaven (see below).²⁹ The absence of any Christian indicator (nimbus or inscription) is also clear. Analogous images in medallions on metal objects of the Christian cult have too later a date (6th-7th centuries) to form an adequate comparison.³⁰ Another flaw with this interpretation is the fact that in the 4th century, although bishops had the status of spiritual leaders, they were still secular individuals, not to be represented on objects of everyday life.

The faces on the brooch bows and feet are schematic without aspiration for personality, their features are expressed with incised dots and lines. The artistic skills of the engravers are various, as the degree of plasticity shows. Maybe the most expressive face is the one on the triangular field of the foot of the Kolartsi brooch (Fig. 2.3). The head is turned, three-quarters to the left and slightly bowed down. Unlike other representations, the eyes are prolonged ovals, not rendered by commas and stretched lines. Together with the low-placed mouth, these features impart to the face a melancholy and wistfulness, which was typical of painting and sculpture from the second half of the 4th and the 5th century. It harks back to the type of *Homo Spiritualis*, the image of the thinker and philosopher.³¹ Most of the other images have too generalised features and it is hard to believe that their smooth faces and hairstyles could be chronologically decisive. It is also difficult to indicate the models, used by the jeweller for these representations – sculptural monuments, wall-paintings, mosaics or coins. This question concerns also the ornamental composition of other pieces with portrait medallions. The so-called ‘animal ewer’ (*lagoena*) from the Sevso treasure is decorated with ten portraits of youths in medallions on the lid. The faces are expressive, and the hairstyles are more detailed than the ones from the brooches, which could be explained by the larger size of the surface suitable for ornamentation,³² but the similarities are obvious (Fig. 2.4). Hexagonal shapes with figures of bestiaries and animals, busts of hunters, various floral and geometric motifs are engraved upon the ewer’s body (Fig. 2.5). The rosette-like motif is the basis of the decoration, but there are also triangles and ‘running waves’, accentuated with *niello* –

²⁹ Deichmann 1948, Taf. XII-XX.

³⁰ See the images on the pectoral and reliquary crosses from the collection of Hellene Stathatos and the Walters Art Gallery (Amandry 1957, 59 n. 44, pl. V; Walters Art Gallery 1947, 72 n. 305, tabl. XXXVIII). An interesting exception is the representation of the young Jesus on the bronze cross from Aquileia, correctly dated to the middle of the 4th century. However, the exact symbol – the nimbus – exists around the Jesus’ head (Warland 1986, 125, 184, Abb. 138). For its earlier interpretations as image of Constantine the Great, see Cecchelli 1954, 196.

³¹ L’Orange 1943, 95.

³² Mango 1990, 74-76 n. 3, figs. 5-7; Steiner 1990, 14; Biroli Stefaneli 1991, 310 n. 200, fig. 255; Mango and Bennet 1994, 304, fig. 7.40-44.



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Fig. 3: 1. Ornaments from body of 'animal ewer', Sevso treasure (adapted from Mango and Bennett 1994); 2. Gold intaglio of Eusebius from Vatican (after Rumpf 1957).

a feature, known from the footplate and the bow of the brooches (Fig. 3.1). The ewer is dated to the middle or late 4th century.³³ Youthful portraits in medallions, hunting scenes and most highly polished floral motifs are also the decoration of the *lanx* from the Concești treasure.³⁴

One of the most famous productions of late antique art decorated with human faces is the glass from Braunsfeld (Cologne) (Fig. 4.1-2).³⁵ Alongside the Bible scenes, represented with gold foil, there are four medallions with youthful images under the glass's mould. These representations are very similar with the ones on the brooches. According to the still-authoritative opinion of R. Delbrueck, these images depict the four sons of Constantine the Great; this piece is in common with many others, mainly from the European parts of the Roman empire, and it was a part of the dynastic policy of the first Christian emperor.³⁶ The images on this glass, as well as many others with similar decoration, are deprived of personality and contrast strongly with the plastic representations of Constantine the Great and his family, known from other monuments of art. In no way could these so-called 'Constantinian' hairstyles be restricted to the first half of the 4th century or to the emperor's court.³⁷ Such schematic images are typical of the stylistic features of the art on glass from the middle-second half of the 4th century.³⁸ The glass from Braunsfeld could be connected with some earlier pieces, as the bottom of the vessel is decorated with a realistic portrait in medallion of the owner or the person to whom the glass was presented. Indeed the gold intaglio of Eusebius from Vatican (Fig. 3.2) is dated to the end of 4th century, but it represents the other main stream in late antique art – that of classicism.³⁹ Such glassware was given as presents to 'heartly friends', as sometimes the medallion is substituted by an inscription, like the one on the glass from Römisch-Germanisches Museum in Cologne, containing the invocation *Piperio vivas*.⁴⁰ From the middle of the 4th century these realistic representations lose their character of individuality and, even in the cases of historical persons, they are

³³ Mango and Bennet 1994, 318.

³⁴ Matzulewitsch 1929, Taf. 48; Harhoiu 1998, 120-21, 172 n. 14, Taf. XV, XVI.1-4.

³⁵ Poppelreuter 1908, 67-76.

³⁶ Delbrueck 1933, 132.

³⁷ In fact the 'Constantinian hairstyles' reflect the imperial propaganda of Constantine the Great – to compare himself with Augustus, copying many elements of his image and also his hairstyle. The later representations, dating from the 330s demonstrate the real Constantinian hairstyle, spread all over the Eastern empire and used by his ancestors (compare the colossal statue from the Basilica of Maxentius in Rome). Its main features are the longer locks on the neck and the forehead, thus representing an oriental style (Delbrueck 1933, 39, 121, Taf. 37).

³⁸ Süssenbach 1983, 18.

³⁹ Rumpf 1957, 25.

⁴⁰ Süssenbach 1983, 19, Abb. 12.



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Fig. 4: 1. Ornamentation of glass from Braunsfeld (after Süssenbach 1983);
2. Busts of youths on glass from Braunsfeld (after Delbrueck 1933).



Fig. 5: Detail from floor mosaic at Aquileia (after Känler 1962).

schematic and have common features. The example with the glass, inscribed *Piperio vivas*, reflects an old antique tradition, as the expressed wishes of luck and welfare on the gift are often attended by Dionysian and hunting scenes, Eros, etc. The grapevine ornament is also a common element. With the widespread introduction of Christianity, part of these subjects disappeared, and others continued their existence with new symbolism. Near by the apse of the mausoleum of empress Constantia (d. 354) in Rome is a mosaic with *genii* and Eros. Medallions with busts of youths, surrounded by grapevine motifs, are placed among them.⁴¹ This applies also to the case of the medallions from the baths (*nymphaeum*) in Catania, representing January (Ianuarius) or busts among the hunting scenes in Piazza Armerina.⁴² Other

⁴¹ Deichmann 1948, 25; Jobst 1976, 432.

⁴² Wilson 1990, 187, fig. 156a.

important examples combining old pagan or classical motifs with Christian ones are the fragment of a sarcophagus from the Villa Doria-Pamphili in Rome,⁴³ on which the departed is represented as sacrificing according to pagan rites between two rows of biblical scenes, the floral ornamentation between cornucopia with busts in medallions of youths on the mosaic pavements from the villa in Daphne, near Antioch,⁴⁴ and the classical motifs from the basilica of Constantine the Great in Bethlehem.⁴⁵

The youthful images on the glass from Braunsfeld could be explained in the same way, and biblical ones replace the pagan-related scenes.

Human images in medallions decorate other elements of dress apart from brooches – belt-buckles and appliqués. The larger ornamental surface allows greater opportunity for the display of compositions, which are known from the imitative arts. A composition like this is represented on a belt-buckle from Intercisa. There are two medallions with youthful busts on the buckle. They are set among schematic floral motifs. Hunting scenes and a life-and-death struggle between animals is displayed on appliqués.⁴⁶ The same scene could be seen on a belt-buckle from Muthmannsdorf (Austria),⁴⁷ and there are also a great number of belt elements with medallions only, belonging to the period of the second half of the 4th-beginning of the 5th century. Similar in date is the bronze casket-plate decorated with four busts from *Bottega artigiana* in Assisi.⁴⁸

All the abovementioned artefacts with medallions are unified by symbolism, originating from Dionysian subjects and their new interpretation in early Christian art.⁴⁹ In this sense the brooches decorated with medallions could be considered in several aspects. Their exact chronological determination – after the middle of the 4th century – excludes the possibility that the images are those of Constantine the Great's dynasty. The features of the images, as well as multiple analogies among works of late antique art, negate the thesis that these are imperial representations. In many cases these items of jewellery do not provide any opportunity for presenting a full ornamental scheme or pattern. The surfaces of brooches are small and there is room for representations of just the medallions, which are the central ornament on the larger artefacts, and some very modified floral ornaments. The decoration of these adornments is used as the total ornamental system and adapted to their features. Probably its symbolism is preserved and a fact of interest is the presence of a Christogram on

⁴³ Wilpert 1929, Taf. 86.1.

⁴⁴ Hanfmann 1951, fig. 101.

⁴⁵ Levi 1947, 506, fig. 185.

⁴⁶ Bullinger 1969, n. 163, Taf. XLII.1-1c.

⁴⁷ Bullinger 1969, n. 95, Taf. XXXV.2.

⁴⁸ Bonfioli 1989, 93-94.

⁴⁹ Süssenbach 1983, 23.

several examples (for example – the brooches from Neviodunum, Basel-Aeschenvorstadt, Moosberg, etc.).⁵⁰ It is also possible that these brooches were given as presents, following the ancient tradition of a 'gift for a hearty friend' in which the bust in the medallion is more or less realistic.

The high concentration of brooches and belt elements with medallions in the Middle Danubian provinces and Pannonia points to their possible origin. In the quality and plasticity of their images, the brooches from Thracia and Dacia are comparable with the Pannonian examples; even the image on the Kolartsi brooch is more closely related to the originals of the paintings than the Pannonian brooches. Taking into consideration the popularity of the form of these brooches and the standardisation of costume in the second half of 4th century, the workshops that produced them could have been located in Middle, but also in Lower Danubian centres.

To conclude. Undoubtedly the cruciform brooches served as *largitio* and *donativa*, marking imperial jubilees or military victories. In the 4th century the civilian population acquired more military characteristics and this type of fibula and the decorated belts had become characteristic (*ornamenta dignitatis*) of a large section of the population. Considering the grave complexes of various *chlamydati*, we could also make the assumption about some kind of fashion among the citizens of the empire for wearing elements typical of the representatives of the military and civil services. Their adoption into the costume of the provincial population led to the unification of the dress elements, to the reduction of their quality, but also to a variety of ornamental motifs. From the arguments exposed above, we can make some deductions. In spite of some similarities with imperial iconography, these images can no longer be regarded as emperors or 'Constantinian princes' because of the later dating of the brooches (to the second half of 4th century). Nor can they form a part of the propagandising programme of the Constantinian family: their archaistic hairstyles do not compare with the imperial coiffures of the Late Constantinian period. In connection with these arguments, all other 4th-century artefacts (glass, bone plastics, silver vessels and floor or wall mosaic pavements, etc.) ornamented with busts of youths can no longer be considered as imperial monuments and enter into a particular group of art works, decorated with Dionysian subjects or images drawn from the nature, just symbolising the 'good life'. Some elements of these subjects, especially the busts of youths but also children at play, animals and aquatic creatures, grapevines and the various stylised ornaments, are adopted from Christianity. Pagans and Christians used them in the decoration of their private houses and did so in spite

⁵⁰ Keller 1971, 34, Abb. 11, 12; Prötel 1988, 365, Abb. 6.1.

of criticism by such authoritative preachers as John Chrysostom.⁵¹ Even when pagan deities were removed (as occurred in the baths of a Roman house at El Haouria, in Tunisia: a frontal mask of Ocean was rubbed out, leaving the images that had framed it in the four corners⁵²), these ornaments survived as relicts of the classical past. In this way Christians often demonstrated their education and high social and economic status.⁵³ The draped busts of youths were also part of this classicising decorative programme. Their origin could be seen as later and more puritanical expressions of minor deities; or as personifications of the powers of nature and thus symbols of life. The cruciform brooches decorated with portraits are the results of a common art industry (*Kunstindustrie*), connected with many aspects of the imitative arts. *Imagines clipeatae* on the brooches as well as these on the silverware (also often used as *largitio*) are the result of the translation of ornaments between the various products of late antique art.

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⁵¹ Maguire 2001, 238.

⁵² Poinssot 1935, figs. 2-6.

⁵³ Reece 1997, 148.

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