

The role of brooches in Roman military dress of the late 1st–3rd centuries AD in the Roman West

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Brooches (*fibulae*) are frequent finds at sites of Roman military installations, sometimes second in quantity only to pottery or Roman military equipment. Until very recently, these objects of personal adornment have often been associated with women. Research by archaeologists and dress specialists – especially and surprisingly by female scholars – has pointed out that men, particularly Roman soldiers, also wore brooches, possibly on a much greater scale than presumed.¹ The idea that brooches constituted the integral part of soldiers' military dress has not, however, received much enthusiasm in literature on the Roman army.² This paper therefore aims to divert attention to these important objects by introducing the idea that brooches were as relevant as any military equipment worn on the battlefield, parade ground or in a fort.

BROOCHES AS IMPORTANT PART OF MILITARY EQUIPMENT

Soldiers wore brooches and wore them as part of their military canvas. Unarmored soldiers or soldiers not in a military campaign would wear a so-called camp dress, consisting of a tunic and belt, nailed sandals, and a cloak pinned on a right shoulder with a brooch.³ It is now widely accepted that particular brooch types were directly associated with the Roman military, such as knee, penannular and P-shaped brooches.⁴ In particular, the concept of knee brooches as 'soldiers' brooches' has been firmly entrenched in contemporary scholarship, since these brooch types have predominantly been uncovered at Roman military forts of the 1st–3rd century AD in the Empire's northwestern areas, and their distribution follows the line of Roman northwestern frontiers.⁵

Though brooches were clearly essential as clothes fasteners, their purpose as simple cloak pinners can be contested.⁶ Brooches' highly visible positioning on military dress – at the eye-catching shoulder level – invites multifaceted debates regarding their significance. Such positioning indicates that brooches were not only used for pinning, but also worn to be seen. Though passive, functional tools used

to secure clothing, brooches had a secondary, decorative function, for these shiny, silvery objects were adorned with various patterns, motifs, and symbols.⁷ The ornamental potential of brooches was thus likely 'fully appreciated and exploited', which made them more than 'purely utilitarian object[s]'.⁸

Within Roman army dress studies, only crossbow brooches of the late 3rd–4th century AD have been recognized to have similar decorative potential. Though initially merely another type of brooch worn by soldiers in the late 3rd century, crossbow *fibulae* became more elaborately decorated objects in the 4th century, at which time they signified membership in the army and administration and were worn exclusively by military and civilian officials of high status.⁹ It is, however, unlikely that brooches' ornamental and symbolic potential as status symbols emerged over the course of the late 3rd–4th century; instead, it might be better dated to much earlier periods. Allason-Jones points out that Roman emperors sought sculptural portraits that depicted them as 'wearing a military uniform with a disc brooch holding their cloaks',¹⁰ and that this was possibly 'a stock image of the emperor and show[ed] him wearing artefacts that were not copied by the general populace, either because they were considered peculiar to the emperor, people who lived in Rome or the military'.¹¹ Yet, the image of a man wearing a cloak pinned at the right shoulder with a disc brooch is not confined to emperors. Depictions of brooches on tombstones and sculptural reliefs in the 1st–3rd century in the Roman West show that predominantly men of high status associated with the Roman army were depicted with round or oval disc brooches with a raised central rosette (Fig. 1).¹² It is a striking, how such depictions resemble those of the 4th century in which high-status military and civilian officials are shown wearing cloaks pinned at the right shoulder with enormous crossbow *fibula*. Though generally assumed that 'the P-shaped type [. . .] was a precursor of the crossbow brooch, a type which we know was worn by military personnel',¹³ it remains questionable whether the crossbow brooch as a

status symbol derived from a depiction of a sharply gendered disc brooch that appears in sculptural reliefs of the High Roman Empire. In this sense, masculinity, status, and military association may have been projected by such conventional images of the disc brooch, which was considered to be an appropriate emblem to represent power.

If so, then did disc brooches closely connect with and constitute part of a Roman military masculinity and status identity, while simpler knee brooches signified more ordinary soldiers of lower status? This question is worth considering, given that various brooch types, including the disc and oval ones, were found in significant quantity at many military sites. Such a variety of styles, types, and forms might indicate that soldiers sought to communicate particular messages about their positions, affinities, and preferences by choosing to wear a particular style of *fibulae* or be depicted with it.¹⁴ At the same time, the occurrence of several brooch types on sites associated with the Roman army justifies the necessity for soldiers to wear different styles on a daily basis, which further suggests that brooches were considered an integral part of Roman army dress and equipment.

Given such a variety, in what circumstances would soldiers wear these objects? On a daily basis, during active campaigns, during patrol duties, or otherwise? Or would soldiers only opt to wear brooches for the craftspeople who carved their funerary monuments?

HOME AND AWAY: BROOCHES AS PART OF SOLDIERS' DAILY AND OCCASIONAL ACTIVITIES

To explore the circumstances in which soldiers wore brooches on a daily basis, the contexts in which they were found needs to be investigated.¹⁵ If we plot the brooches across a hypothetical auxiliary fort, it appears that brooches can be found in every corner of a military installation (Fig. 2). The following finds serve as examples: brooches from a German frontier fort Saalburg were found 'next to the armory' and near the so-called bake-houses, where food was prepared for the garrison.¹⁶ In other forts, brooches are common finds in the bath-houses and barrack blocks, including centurion quarters, as well as on the streets between barrack blocks (*praetentura* and *retentura*).¹⁷

It is worth noting that quite a substantial amount of brooches has been found in ramparts. Rubbish pits and ramparts are the usual places to look for brooches taken out of circulation, since these areas contained disposed debris and rubbish from a fort.¹⁸ Such is the case for fragmented and incomplete brooches discarded due to their state. Yet, more-or-less complete brooches were found in layers associated with the rebuilding activity of ramparts at forts on the British and German frontiers.¹⁹ The brooches found are in excellent states, though their pins and catchplates have been broken, which can be considered to indicate that they were broken when worn, which suggests that the brooches were dropped during the building or reconstruction work of



Fig. 1: A tombstone commemorating Aurelius Ingenius, a watch-commander of Legio II Parthica, Qal'at al Madiq, Syria (LUPA 13284-3). © Ortoif Harl (1995)

ramparts.²⁰ That brooches were easily lost and that military carelessness was common is clear from the other above-mentioned contexts, which moreover signify the fact that *fibulae* formed a part of the soldiers' everyday clothing.

Brooches are not, however, concentrated only within the physical walls of a fort; they are also frequent finds in milecastles, turrets, and fortlets. An analysis of small finds from smaller military installations on the German and British frontiers suggests that, among many artifacts such as weapons, military equipment, pottery, items of personal adornment and jewelry, brooches have been usual finds.²¹ A more detailed analysis of brooch distribution in turrets and milecastles on Hadrian's Wall indicates that a variety of types have been found, some with enamels and most of them mostly complete.²² This analysis

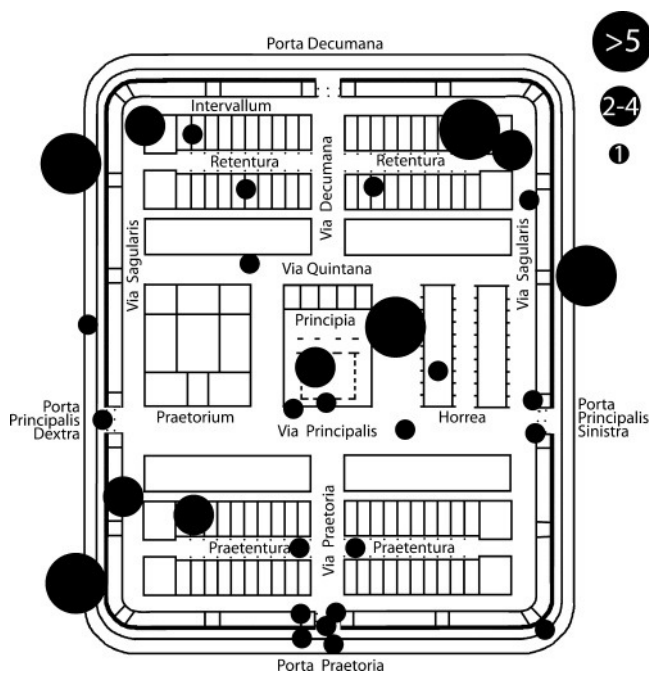


Fig. 2: Distribution of late 1st–3rd century AD brooches from forts Birdoswald, Chesterholm (Vindolanda), Housesteads, Niederbieber, and Saalburg. Image of a fort after FISCHER, 2012, 257. © Joep van Rijn.

prompted Allason-Jones to suggest that ‘soldiers not only wore brooches [in turrets] but also lost them with a great deal of unmilitary carelessness’.²³

All of this evidence confirms the everyday nature of brooches; they were worn on a daily basis in camp, during the building activities of the fort, and by soldiers on patrol in outposts. Yet, their wear was not limited to the non-combatant periods in the lives of the military. Archaeological evidence points to the possibility that *fibulae* were also worn during military conflicts, possibly during fighting and on battlefields.²⁴ The example of Kalkriese, a site of a Varus battle in AD 9, is the most compelling; it has produced roughly 80 brooches so far.²⁵ The majority of the Roman-related finds were concentrated north of the rampart, which is generally assumed to be a Germanic entrenchment built as a trap for the Varus forces and next to which actual fighting occurred.²⁶ Since it is clear from these finds that the Romans tried to storm the wall, the presence of brooches near the rampart area might indicate that some soldiers still wore cloaks pinned with brooches during the attack.²⁷

Altogether, there is little doubt that brooches formed an important part of Roman military equipment and played an active role in the everyday activities of soldiers. However, it remains unclear how soldiers received these important cloth fasteners. The question of supply pertains, since its answer may give explanation why soldiers owned a variety of styles and types to choose from and to wear. Yet, this is

not as straightforward a topic as it might seem, for it appears that brooches reached military forts in a variety of ways rather than came from one centralized distribution center or only from local workshops.

SUPPLY AND DEMAND

Brooch parts (pins, spirals, and catchplates) are most liable to break. Doubtlessly, some repair of broken brooches occurred onsite at forts, possibly in *fabrica* or small-scale smithies set into the annexes or ramparts.²⁸ Such workshops were responsible for producing metal materials such as nails, fittings, and weapons, and for repairing armor, which may have included brooches.²⁹ Moreover, reparations did not only end with pins and springs; brooches with enamels may have also been repaired. At Birdoswald, a glass lamp that may have been used to produce enamels, which were usually applied to decorate brooches manufactured in Roman Britain, was found.³⁰ Possibly, one of the Birdoswald fort’s workshops was responsible for repairing brooches that had lost their enameled decorations. This workshop or another may have even been involved in producing small quantities of enameled *fibulae*, given that the supply of enamels might have been sparse at this frontier post. Furthermore, though circumstantial, evidence points to the repair and small-scale production of small artifacts, brooches included, on military sites.³¹ Housesteads fort on Hadrian’s Wall produced evidence of metalworking debris, which shows that ‘manufacture, rather than simply repair of equipment, was taking place there. Examination of the moulds indicates that the objects being made were belt buckles or suspension loops’.³² In the Niederbieber fort on the Upper German limes, the majority of brooches and their various parts were found in a pit situated next to a building identified by excavators as *fabrica*, the ground of which was covered with ‘the rests of white and red clay used for the molds’.³³

Another way to acquire brooches has been through various regional workshops. In his analysis of brooches from the legionary fortress of Wroxeter, Mackreth indicates that the brooch site spectrum ‘reflect[s] a movement [of a legion] from the south-east [in Britain]’.³⁴ As such, this movement also indicates that soldiers bought brooches on the go or that supply could have been short-termed depending on the length of time that a unit was positioned at a particular territory, which may have even spanned a couple of months.³⁵ In this scheme, an army on the move could have replaced the lost or broken brooches from local sources, which suggests the need for a constant supply of brooches and that units stocked up on *fibulae* from the native supplies before moving into areas where there was no tradition of wearing and producing brooches.³⁶ When stranded in particular areas for years, the units might have received brooches from a number of local workshops. The variety of brooch types, forms, and ways of decorating

them found at any given military site suggests that their supply was not limited to one local workshop, but that *fibulae* reached forts from many different small workshops that did not necessarily operate within close proximity to the forts, as well as by mobile craftspeople.³⁷

Moreover, there is enough evidence to suggest that some brooches were brought by soldiers from their previous postings. Soldiers either wore them during their transfer or kept them as part of their personal possessions,³⁸ as indicated by the brooch spectrum at a couple of military sites. Forts in the Roman province *Germania Superior*, such as Köngen, Saalburg, and Zugmantel, had in their assemblage brooches ranging from the ‘Gallic’ and ‘Norico-Pannonian’ to those worn in provinces of *Raetia* and *Britannia*, in the eastern Danube provinces, and the German *Barbaricum*.³⁹

FUTURE WORK

The present paper only touches the tip of an iceberg. Nevertheless, it has shown that brooches as part of the military canvas were ‘more than meets the eye’.⁴⁰ Much work still needs doing in order to fully comprehend what different forms and types of brooches actually meant and what kind of messages their wear communicated. At this point, particular attention should be paid to the status communicated by brooches in Roman military dress, especially the abovementioned possible association of the depicted disc brooch with military masculine identity and the daily practice of wear of disc and oval brooches, which are often assumed to be associated with women. Other questions worth considering are whether there were any differences between brooches worn by legionary, auxiliary, and numeri soldiers,⁴¹ and what kind of relationship existed between the brooches and button-and-loop fasteners known to have been in simultaneous use in 2nd century AD? Analyses of brooches’ metal compositions to investigate the particular isotopes can aid in illuminating where brooches were made, which would contribute to studying their production and distribution. From another perspective, brooch distribution on a given military site can provide a fuller picture of how space was used in military installations on a daily basis, as well as what was worn when particular activities occurred. In general, instances of personal dress accessories can elucidate the lives lived on Roman battlefields, and the more detailed the analysis of brooch typology, the clearer the movement of particular units through provinces and the nature of military garrisons. All of the above can contribute to our knowledge of the people who crisscrossed the known Roman world with the Roman army.

It is to be hoped that this essay brought to the surface the overall significance of these small finds in the daily routines of Roman soldiers, as well as indicated the value of brooches and the necessity to study them within Roman military equipment scholarship.

NOTES

- 1 ALLASON–JONES, 1995; ALLASON–JONES, 2013, 27; ALLISON, 2013; COOL, 1983; ECKARDT, 2005; SWIFT, 2011, esp. 212–16. MACKRETH, 2011 is, so far, the only scholar in this line who is a man.
- 2 There, brooches continuously received attention in a few sentences, which affirms their role as clothes fasteners; cf. BISHOP & COULSTON, 2006, 111; JAMES, 2004, 62; and SUMNER, 2009, who discuss brooches only in relation to cloaks. For a notable exception, see FISCHER, 2012, who devotes approximately five pages to the development of military brooches. See also past *RoMEC Proceedings*, where brooches have appeared only in contributions discussing finds from military installations or sites associated with military activity, but not as independent military dress accessories.
- 3 HOSS, 2012, 29.
- 4 MCINTOSH, 2011, 159, after BAYLEY & BUTCHER, 2004, 179; SNAPE, 1993, 20.
- 5 ALLASON–JONES, 2013, 27, after COOL, 1983 and ECKARDT, 2005; ALLISON, 2013, 72–4; MACKRETH, 2011, 237; SWIFT, 2011, 212–16.
- 6 Brooches are essentially buttons that hold two pieces of clothing together. Yet, buttons themselves sometimes fulfill additional roles; for instance, buttons worn on the military uniforms by soldiers of Napoleonic army had both numbers and images on them. Inscribed with a hunting horn and a number (e.g., 6 or 9), a button indicated that the uniform belonged to a soldier in the 6th or 9th light Infantry regiment. Similarly, American Civil War uniform buttons were inscribed with insignias of a soldier’s regiment and rank, as well as the state seal.
- 7 ALLASON–JONES, 2005, 121.
- 8 JOHNS, 1996, 147.
- 9 COLLINS, 2010, 63–64 after HEURGON, 1958 and KELLER, 1971; SWIFT, 2000, esp. 230–1. Cf. COULSTON, 2004, 143.
- 10 ALLASON–JONES, 2013, 27.
- 11 ALLASON–JONES, 2013, 25.
- 12 LUPA 3593 (tombstone with *cursus honorum* of a legionary centurion); LUPA 862 (tombstone of a legionary with double pay); LUPA 3268 (tombstone of a scribe of a legionary legate); LUPA 3338 (tombstone of a prefect of a cohort); LUPA 3745 (tombstone of a legionary veteran); LUPA 3542 (tombstone of a *beneficiarius* attached to tribune of a cohort); LUPA 3594 (tombstone of a legionary soldier); LUPA 4691 and 13284 (two tombstones of a legion’s *tesserarii*, or watch-commanders); LUPA 8172 (portrait of a standard-bearer); and LUPA 10796 (bust of a *custos armorum*, or a keeper of armor).
- 13 MCINTOSH, 2011, 162. Also see BAYLEY & BUTCHER, 2004, 183–4; COLLINS, 2010, 64.
- 14 Though this paper’s space is limited, the role of some brooches’ types in projecting particular messages has been discussed elsewhere. For brooches with religious associations, see CRUMMY, 2007; for possible ethnic connotations, see

- IVLEVA, 2011, IVLEVA, 2012, and ROTHE, 2013. For an argument that zoomorphic brooches had particular ideological meaning, see ALLASON–JONES, 2015.
- 15 How brooches entered archaeological records needs to be given close attention. Brooches might have been lost by careless soldiers or simply discarded. There is a fine line between losing objects and simply throwing them away. For instance, *fibulae* finds in rooms may come from filling these rooms once they fell into disuse or when they were given new floors (Stefanie Hoss, pers. comment). However, we should not rule out the possibility that some objects, while being worn, fell into places where the owner could not reach them.
- 16 BÖHME, 1972, near armory (no 825) and near bake-houses (nos 232, 953, and 1070). Cf. also an umbonate brooch found at a fort Birdoswald on Hadrian's Wall in a rampart building that served as a bake-house in period B (WILMOTT, 1997, 280–1).
- 17 For bath-houses: at Saalburg, see BÖHME, 1972 (no 375); at Vindolanda, see SNAPE, 1993 (nos 179 and 187); and at Weissenburg, see WAMSER, 1986, 107. For barrack-blocks: at Housesteads, see ALLASON–JONES, 2009, 431–6, context H13 corresponding to building XIII, where seven brooches were found (nos 8, 9, 15, 16, 21, 24, and 25). On the streets: at Saalburg, see BÖHME, 1972 (nos 107, 516, 534, 539, 540, 562, 567, 604, 681, 712, 741, 794, 822, 823, and 1172).
- 18 RUSHWORTH, 2009, 78.
- 19 Cf. disc brooch from Housesteads found in the northern rampart (ALLASON–JONES, 2009, 434, no 22); trumpet brooch from Birdoswald (WILMOTT, 1997, 278, no 55); or another trumpet from Saalburg (BÖHME, 1970, 7, no 8).
- 20 Cf. WILMOTT, 1997, 88: 'The finds from this period [2 of a rampart] are few in number and all appear to be the result of casual loss. Small personal possessions such as coins, brooches, counters, and the button and loop fastener could all have been dropped during building work'.
- 21 JILEK & BREEZE, 2007, 208.
- 22 ALLASON–JONES, 1988, 217; SNAPE, 1993, 119–20.
- 23 ALLASON–JONES, 2001, 22.
- 24 Joanne Ball, University of Liverpool, who conducts doctoral research on the archaeology of Greek and Roman battlefields, was the first to point out to me that brooches, among many other small objects, are frequent finds on Roman battlefields. Cf. BALL, 2014.
- 25 HARNECKER & MYLO, 2011, 7.
- 26 WILBERS-ROST *et al.*, 2007, 78.
- 27 ROST & WILBERS-ROST, 2012, 33–4, for brooch distribution on the battlefield, see insert 12.
- 28 That pins, springs, and catchplates were repaired in Roman times is evident from the marks on some of the brooches (compiled from the Portable Antiquities Scheme database). For the reparation of pins, springs, and chords, see: BUC-3CF745 (Northhamptonshire); FAPJW-A67042 (Darlington); BERK-609396 (Oxfordshire); HAMP-702323 (Wiltshire); PUBLIC-D4D221 (Monmouthshire); DENO-C1FFA4 (Nottinghamshire); PUBLIC-0A0494 (Glamorgan); SUR-71F334 (Surrey); HESH-E825B8 (Staffordshire); WMID-F92DC6 (Derbyshire); WILT-56D935 (Wiltshire); SUR-6E3DE7 (Surrey); YORYM-C51044 (Yorkshire); BH-FA0950 (Hertfordshire); SUR-7443F0 (Surrey); NMGW-8D3F02 (Newport); SOMDOR755 (Dorset). For the reparation of catchplates, see: YORYM-B1B603 (Yorkshire); NCL-476F76 (Lincolnshire); YORYM-BBFE46 (Yorkshire); GLO-886DF4 (Gloucester); NMS-CBD917 (Norfolk); NMS-522F91 (Norfolk); YORYMB1745 (Yorkshire); YORYMB1744 (Yorkshire).
- 29 WILMOTT, 1997, 165 on *fabricae* in auxiliary forts; cf. SIM & KAMINSKI, 2012, 25; FISCHER, 2012, 265. Vince van Thienen from Ghent University believes that pins and catchplates of some crossbow brooches found at a site at Oudenburg fort, Belgium were produced onsite, whilst the brooches themselves were manufactured elsewhere. Van Thienen is conducting a scientific examination to investigate this, but the results were unavailable at the time of this paper's submission.
- 30 WILMOTT, 1997, 277.
- 31 Direct evidence of the brooches' production within the fort boundaries comes from Sofie Vanhoutte's (Flemish Heritage Agency) research on the fort of Oudenburg. Vanhoutte presented a poster at the XVIIIth RoMEC entitled 'Brooch production at the Roman fort of Oudenburg (Belgium) in the later 3rd century AD.'
- 32 RUSHWORTH, 2009, 65.
- 33 GECHTER, 1980, 592.
- 34 MACKRETH, 2002, 91.
- 35 MACKRETH, 2002, 93.
- 36 MACKRETH, 2002, 90.
- 37 BUTCHER, 1977; esp. MCINTOSH's 2013 research into the distribution of the Wirral brooches that has shown that objects travelled from the area around the Wirral Peninsula in Northwest England to the forts on Hadrian's Wall and beyond into the southern Scotland as trade items and as templates with craftspeople.
- 38 SWIFT, 2000, 208; SWIFT, 2011, 212–14; cf. also IVLEVA, 2011; IVLEVA, 2012.
- 39 For Köngen, see LUIK, 1996; for Saalburg and Zugmantel, see BÖHME, 1972.
- 40 JUNDI & HILL's 1998 article, which discussed the necessity to study brooches with greater attention and to move beyond simple typological studies.
- 41 Stefanie Hoss aims to pursue this research further.

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LUPA = picture database of antique stone monuments
<http://www.ubi-erat-lupa.org>

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