

C1.2. COMMUNICATION – FULL ARTICLE

The Braganza Fibula: Medicine, Portugal and Galicia

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ABSTRACT: Inspired by Alejandro Rodriguez Cardaso's legacy in promoting Galician-Portuguese heritage, this study presents the Braganza Fibula—a late Iron Age masterpiece largely unknown outside specialist circles. The objective is to explore novel medical interpretations of its symbolic and functional role in ancient healing practices, situating it within a network of similar artifacts that embody the cultural and medical identity of Galicia and northern Portugal, bridging art, medicine, and Atlantic Northwest heritage. Methods involved contextual and comparative interpretive analysis with similar artifacts. Results show that the fibula as a cultural emblem highlighting intertwined artistic excellence and early medical knowledge in ancient Iberian societies.

KEYWORDS: Iberian Culture; Atlantic Art; Celtic Medicine; Iron Age; Archaeology

BACKGROUND AND AIM

The Braganza Brooch (Fibula de Bragança) is a gold long-footed fibula depicting a naked warrior with Celtic helmet, sword and scabbard, and a hound, probably made on the Iberian Peninsula in the third–second centuries BCE. Originally part of the jewellery collection of the Portuguese royal house of Braganza, it was later acquired by the British Museum and has since been read both as a masterpiece of La Tène-period craftsmanship and as a complex cosmological image. In its initial studies, the brooch was frequently interpreted as a Greek product due to its technical refinement and classical nudity. Hitherto unknown to the Portuguese academic public despite its Braganza royal provenance, this article proposes a new reading, combining a 2023 British Museum visit to the Department of Britain, Europe and Prehistory collections, observation of comparable pieces in Portuguese private collections, and comparisons with Iron Age hoards from Galicia and northern Portugal, to demonstrate its specific regional links while interpreting it as more than adornment:

possessing medical, telluric and chthonic powers tied to the sacred and the world of the dead.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The analysis draws on direct observation of the Braganza Brooch during a 2023 visit to the British Museum's Department of Britain, Europe and Prehistory collections, with particular attention to its morphology, manufacturing techniques, and iconographic programme; examination of comparable Late Iron Age fibulae, weapons and zoomorphic artefacts from private collections in Portugal; and review of published Iron Age hoards from the Galicia–northern Portugal region, focusing on La Tène-type fibulae, Celtic-influenced metalwork, and warrior equipment.

RESULTS

Direct examination during the 2023 British Museum visit confirmed the fibula's exceptional La Tène craftsmanship. The Montefortino helmet features a distinctive crest and cheek guards. A finely engraved

dagger hangs at the warrior's hip. The dynamic hound completes the scene. All mark peninsular Iberian Celtic military tradition, not Greek production.

Artefacts from Portuguese private collections show striking typological matches. So do hoards from Galicia and northern Portugal. Shared goldwork, animal motifs and weapon details emerge. These firmly situate the brooch in a northwest Iberian workshop milieu. It most probably belonged to an elite of this region.

The piece mimetically reproduces the region's military art. Montefortino helmets recur often. Daggers appear recurrently in local warrior graves. Chimeric hybrid creatures encode tripartite world order here.

Iconographically, the intricately entwined rear serpent evokes the encircling Ocean as cosmic boundary. Its sinuous interwoven form mirrors the fibula's elaborate filigree structure. As patron animal of medicine, this reptile links intimately to healing practices since at least the Archaic period. The central warrior with hunting dog confronts the two-headed wolf chimeric. This marks earthly liminality and martial ordeal. The boar connects to the wolf by an *umbilical cord*. Explicitly recognised as an underworld animal, it signals chthonic regeneration, fertility and mediation with the dead. All motifs root deeply in Galaico-Portuguese ritual landscapes.

These layered elements recur across Indo-European traditions. Yet they calibrate distinctly to northwest Iberian contexts. Early Greek attributions fail. The brooch functions as a multifunctional talisman: not mere adornment, but a vessel of telluric power, medical protection and controlled passage between worlds crafted for elites of this region.

CONCLUSIONS

The Braganza Brooch stands as distinctly Iberian, rooted in Galicia-northern Portugal. Early Greek readings betray a classicising bias that overlooked its Celtic-La Tène essence. The 2023 British Museum visit, private collection studies and regional hoard evidence unveil it. Now introduced to Portuguese academia despite its Braganza royal past, the brooch fuses martial prestige, cosmological mapping and chthonic healing into one portable artefact. Beyond elite adornment, it opens a window onto the religious world and imaginary of the peoples who inhabited this territory, revealing prehistoric medicine's deep entanglement of sacred powers, underworld forces and warrior identity.

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