The impressively large Ponto-Gothic gold and garnet fibula recently acquired by the Museum must have been worn proudly at one time by a Gothic chieftain or his wife. Its heavy elegance, the subdued brilliance of the gold and of the dark red stones would be worthy to enrich even a royal attire. Indeed, the fibula is said to be part of the famous Second Szilagy-Somlyo Treasure whose owner—though unknown—could easily have been the Visigothic king Athanaric himself. The fibula is an object of rare beauty from the time of the sojourn of the Goths on the northern shores of the Black Sea—the Pontus Euxinus of the ancients. Only very few comparable pieces exist, none of them in the United States.

Literary sources from which we can draw information are few and sometimes rather vague. According to Jordanes the Goths were a group of barbarian tribes. Under the leadership of their king Berig (Baiariks), they came from their settlements in southern Scandinavia to the European mainland in search of better pastures and more space for agriculture. In the first century A.D., they were already settled on the southern shores of the Baltic Sea, around the basin of the lower Vistula river. They had trade relations with the south and must have known of the great expanses of extremely fertile soil in southern Russia. Their population increased very rapidly, and, in the course of the second century, they continued their push southward. The Goths and the related tribes which joined them followed the Vistula upstream, bypassed the Pripiat marshes "with the tremulous soil," and following the course of a big river (either Dniester or Dnieper), they reached the Black Sea about 235.

Part of the Goths, known as the Visigoths (Terwingi), settled west of the "river," while others, known as Ostrogoths (Greutungi), crossed the river and occupied the South Russian plains (called Scythia, where Scythians and Sarmatians lived) and, later, the Crimea. In the east the Goths spread almost to the Caucasus. But in the west they had to stop on the Danube, the frontier of the Roman Empire, although the Roman armies, whose "drinking cups had become heavier than their swords," had a hard time keeping their advance in check. Jordanes describing the Goths says: "all these peoples surpass the Romans by their great stature, and greater courage, and are terrible by their wild furor in battle, . . . They are of a race of indomitable courage and always ready to fight." The Goths were dangerous enemies, and as victors they demanded the best.

When the Goths came to the northern shores of the Black Sea they found a highly developed and refined goldsmith's art making use of stone inlay, which was flourishing in the workshops of such Greek colony-towns as Panticapeon, the present-day Kerch. The use of gold with filigree work and granulation was
Ponto-Gothic fibula, gold with garnets. Second half of the iv century. Fletcher Fund, 1947

typical of Hellenistic jewelry in general, while the decoration with colored stones, developed under influences from the East, was brought to the South Russian plains in the third century B.C. by migrating tribes. The workshops of the Hellenistic colony-towns in the Crimea worked in this colorful style primarily for their barbarian customers, possibly even employing barbarian craftsmen in their shops, but using the colored stones very sparingly, if at all, in the jewelry made for the Greeks.

It was under the influence of the taste for magnificence, which the Goths acquired quickly, that their fibulae became the precious objects of Ponto-Gothic culture of which the Museum fibula is a superb example, made of
silver and gold, decorated with filigree, granulation, and, particularly, with stones and cloisonné inlay. The Pontine Goths seem to have favored especially the combination of red garnets with gold. Later, they carried the Pontine style west, eventually as far as Spain, when their turn came, after 375, to move on under the pressure of invaders from Asia — the terrible Huns. Some of the Ostrogoths, as well as most of the Sarmatian tribes, such as the Alans, stayed on under the Hunnic domination, and some even joined the army of the Huns in its westward march. But others, after an unsuccessful resistance, fled west and, together with the Visigoths, looked for new land beyond the Danube and for protection within the limits of the Roman Empire. During all the wanderings of the Goths over Europe, the richly decorated bow fibula remains one of the most characteristic objects of their material culture.

The bow fibula is best identified as a garment or shoulder pin because it primarily served to hold together the folds of a garment, usually a mantle, at the shoulder. The basic characteristics of a bow fibula of the early period of the migrations are a usually semicircular head plate and a rhomboid foot plate, connected by an arched bow, or bridge, with the pin proper attached to the reverse of the fibula. We find that as a rule it was worn with the “head plate” downward. We also know from some finds in hoards and grave excavations that sometimes fibulae were worn, apparently by women, in pairs — one on each shoulder — connected by a chain. It is usual for fibulae of this period to have one or more highly decorative knobs — the ends of the reinforcing structure of the spring coils of the pin — protruding at the margin of the head plate. The construction of the pin proper is based on the same principle as our present-day safety pin, of a much more rugged and heavy variety, in line with its size and the weight of the material it was to hold together — probably woolen or linen homespun.

The earliest bow fibulae of the type known as “Gothic,” because worn by Goths, made of bronze, of small size and simple character, were found in the South Russian and Danubian regions, in Gothic graves of the late second and early third centuries. In the course of the fourth century the Gothic bow fibula becomes larger and more elongated, while the original semicircular shape of the head plate is occasionally modified. The development of the Ponto-Gothic fibula reaches its climax
around 400; it is at this time that the fibula becomes a sumptuous and precious piece of jewelry hiding the actual pin; looking at the ornate beauty of the Museum piece, it is rather difficult to think of it as a merely glorified safety pin.

The Museum fibula is in a very good state of preservation, showing only slight traces of wear and little damage. It has been cleaned at the Museum, but, when examined under a microscope, a few minute particles of sand or similar matter, probably from the soil in which it must have been buried, can still be seen clinging to its surface, lodged in some corners. The fibula has an approximately rectangular head plate, with two of the outer corners removed, a broad bow, and a rhomboid-shaped foot plate. Of a double spiral-spring coil construction only fragments remain. There are no knobs on the fibula; they must have been lost at the time the spring coils themselves were broken off. At the horizontal margin of the head plate there are two places showing possible traces of some attachments.

These might have been either the knobs, or pendants, like those seen on fibulae of some imperial portraits on Byzantine coins and medallions.

The fibula is made of heavy gold leaf placed over a silver core; the back is left uncovered, and soldered to it are the fragments of the pin. Garnets of various shapes placed in a symmetrically balanced pattern, several now empty cloissons which probably contained some enamel-like substance, gold filigree wire, and granules decorate the fibula. The gold is deep in color, while the red stones, cut en cabochon (with a convex upper surface), are of a variety of shades ranging from a lighter wine pink to a very dark, almost black red. Such stones are usually referred to as "garnets," but sometimes they are called either "almandines" — the precious garnets of ancient times or, occasionally, "carbuncles" — garnets or rubies, stones of the color of "red-hot coal," cut en cabochon.

In the period to which the fibula belongs, the early period of the great Germanic migrations over Europe, garnets for the most part were imported to the shores of the Black Sea and to Europe by trade routes from India, especially from Burma, although other sources, such as Asia Minor, are also mentioned by Pliny. The best garnets of this period are called by some "Syrian," wrongly suggesting their provenance from Syria. In
reality they should be called "Syriam," the choicest specimens of garnets having been acquired in Syria, once the capital of the ancient kingdom of Pegu, in Burma. In the same manner, the name "almandine" for garnets is probably derived from Pliny's "alabandine" red stone cut and polished near Alabanda, in Caria in Asia Minor.

Occasionally a question arises whether some of the red inlay in cloisonné work on European jewelry of the migration period is garnet or red glass. Sir A. H. Church, of the Victoria and Albert Museum (Precious Stones, London, 1924), may have given an answer for some cases when he said that some varieties of garnets can be fused at a high temperature and then "yield a vitreous mass which is of much lower density than that of the original garnets." It could be that masses of otherwise unusable garnet chips were fused, cut, and then used for inlay work.

In order to enhance the brilliancy of the garnets in the Ponto-Gothic and the later Frankish jewelry, small pieces of thin gold foil, either plain or hatched, were often put under the translucent stones. On our fibula such foil can be seen under one of the stones—the only flat stone used. This foil has been stamped with a circle, probably in order to create in reflection an illusion of a cabochon cut to match the other stones.

It has been said that the Museum fibula was part of a treasure known as the Second Treasure of Szilagy-Somlyo, one of the two fabulous hoards of the fourth century, comparable only to that from Petrossa, in Rumania. But no documentary proof of such a statement could be found up to now. Like most of the other treasures of this period the treasures of Szilagy-Somlyo, in Transylvania, were found by sheer accident, within a short distance from one another, by shepherd boys and by a peasant digging in his field: the first (in the Vienna Museum) — in 1797, the second (in the Budapest Museum) — in 1889. Isolated pieces belonging to the second treasure have been found at other times in the same location. Thus it seems quite possible that the Museum fibula, probably found separately, was sold privately.

The most recent and extremely valuable study of the second Szilagy-Somlyo find, published by Nándor Fettich, illustrates and fully discusses the numerous fibulae included in it. Several fibulae in the find are close in style and technique to ours, especially the pair of which one is shown on this page. Their
size, shape, general character, and distribution of the garnets over the surface are related. Some other details of the Museum piece, such as the enamel inlay and the twisted wire decoration on the bow, relate it to another pair.

The dates most recently given for the second Szilagy-Somlyo find and the chronological grouping of individual pieces within it, established by Fettich, have been generally accepted. The basis of such datings is found in the medallions with portraits of Roman emperors which were part of the first Szilagy-Somlyo find. Such portrait medallions were given by the rulers of the Roman Empire to barbarian kings as tokens of friendship and benevolence, and in a way, as mild bribes. The Goths, in order to display such gifts conspicuously, had them mounted in settings of their liking, sometimes with garnet inlay. Dates are assigned with reasonable accuracy to variations in technique, according to the dates of the emperors represented on the medallions. Those of the first Szilagy-Somlyo treasure bear the portraits of emperors who reigned from 286 to 383, and the probable date of the hiding of both treasures is around the time of the great defeats of the Visigoths by the Huns. King Athanaric fled to the court of Constantinople in 381 and is said to have buried his treasures before his flight. Important chieftains might well have done the same.

Whether or not the Museum fibula actually belonged to the Szilagy-Somlyo treasure, its dating depends on the dating of the latter. Its stylistic relationship places it within the group dated by Fettich in "the beginning of the last third of the fourth century." Other related fibulae also belong to finds either from the end of the fourth century, or from around 400. The twisted wire decoration on the bow of our fibula is similar to that on two early fourth-century fibulae found in Hungary and has no parallel on fifth-century examples.

Other important fibulae similar in size, technique, and style, but not quite as close in style as those of Szilagy-Somlyo and a little later in date, are the pairs of fibulae from Untersiebenbrunn, in Austria, and Airan, in Normandy. E. Kubitschek, who published the Untersiebenbrunn find, thinks that the tomb in which the fibulae were found was that of a woman. Other items here are quite similar to those found in Airan and in some tombs in Kertch, in the Crimea.

Szilagy-Somlyo fibula with enamel in the center of the head plate. 350-375. Budapest
The Airan tomb, like that of Untersiebenbrunn, could have been that of a woman, and Edouard Salin, who with Albert France-Lanord recently published the find, suggests several ideas as to the owner of the treasure. It could have been the wife of an Alan chieftain (the Alans being one of the principal Sarmatian tribes) who came to France with the Hunnic hordes, or it could have been a Saxon princess whose jewelry, made in Pontine workshops, had been brought to the north by trade routes. As far as we know there were then no large units of Goths in northern France.

The two Airan fibulae, when found, were still connected by a long silver chain, with a ring in the middle. Their decoration is not as rich as that of the Museum fibula, and, like those from Untersiebenbrunn, they are of a slightly later date. Salin dates the grave in the beginning of the fifth century, or about 407, and states that judging by the quality of the workmanship of the fibulae they must have come from the Pontine workshops of Graeco-Sarmatian tradition. The latter continued to exist under the Hunnic domination, on a reduced scale, as shown by some Crimean (Kertch) finds.

In general one can say that all of the known material closely related to the Museum fibula has been found outside of Russia—with the exception of one fibula of the Szilagy-Somlyo type found rather recently in the Orel region (known only from a small perfunctory drawing but not yet published in detail) and another from Nejine.

The workmanship of the fibula belongs to the culture of the Ponto-Danubian region, but the actual place of its manufacture cannot be definitely established. It might have been made either in southern Russia or by a craftsman trained in the same tradition but working elsewhere. We know that in the Danube region goldsmiths had been working for the provincial Roman market. Both in South Russia and in the Danube regions examples have been found of simpler garnet decoration on fibulae of earlier types, but whether any extensive inlay work was practiced in the Danube region in the fourth century is not known.

Whether the craftsman who made the fibula was a Greek, a Goth, or a Sarmatian also cannot be said. He might have been an itinerant craftsman. On the other hand, we know that "barbaric" Germanic kings kept "barbaric" jewelers at their courts. A sixth-century author, Eugyppius, in his description of the life of Saint Severinus, Christian missionary in the Noricum in the fifth century, mentions that the "savage and malfeasant wife of Felecteus [king of the Rugii, another Germanic people] kept as prisoners under a close guard certain barbaric goldsmiths for the manufacture of royal adornments." It probably is not a unique case.

Our knowledge of the early period of the Dark Ages to which the fibula belongs still remains relatively limited, and literary sources are scarce. The pendulum of opinion on the preponderance of Western versus Eastern origins of styles and sources swings according to trends and whims of times and individuals. One thing remains certain: the style of the objects of the migration period was integrated with and unquestionably became part of Western culture, contributing to and influencing its development. In the twentieth century the "barbaric" beauty of the fibula still captivates our fancy.