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Cover photo:

The front page: Amber nuggets and semi-finished amber beads and pendants from pit-house 7/91 in Biskupice, Poland.

Photo: Marcin Woźniak.

The back page: Suspension loop for gold bracteate S12625, from Hå on Jæren, Rogaland. Photo: Annette G. Øvrelid.

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An unusual treasure find of the 3rd century from Suluc in Dobruja (Romania) with fragments of a Scandinavian snake-head arm ring

DIETER QUAST

Dieter Quast 2025. **An unusual treasure find of the 3rd century from Suluc in Dobruja (Romania) with fragments of a Scandinavian snake-head arm ring.** *AmS-Skrifter* 29, 99–106, Stavanger, ISSN 0800-0816, ISBN 978-82-7760-205-9.

In 1911, a most remarkable treasure find from the last third of the 3rd century was discovered in Suluc in Dobruja, Romania. It contained four Roman gold coins (Hostilian and Gallienus), the gold head of an emperor's bust, two silver cups of the Leuna Type, a gold crossbow brooch and three gold arm rings. One of them is a snake-head arm ring of Hildebrand's Type C. The treasure from Suluc is extraordinary, as a comparable composition does not exist elsewhere in the eastern part of the Roman Empire. There, deposits of the 3rd century mainly contained coins, and occasionally precious-metal jewellery. Silverware, on the other hand, has been deposited more frequently only since the 4th century. It is therefore possible that the find from Suluc was hidden by a non-resident in the Roman Empire. As some of the objects already were in second- or even third-hand use and obviously were worn as jewellery or as "trophies of war", it is likely that the treasure is connected with the numerous Gothic incursions into the Roman Empire in the second half of the 3rd century.

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Key words: Hoard, "trophies of war", jewellery, Leuna-Type silver cups, gold imperial bust

Introduction

In this article, I present an unusual treasure find that in my opinion is eminently suitable for shedding light on the interconnections between northern and south-eastern Europe in the 3rd century AD. It was found in the Dobruja region in present-day Romania.¹ In the 3rd century, the area belonged to the Roman province of Moesia Inferior and, after AD 282, to the province of Scythia. In Suluc, near the small town of Măcin (administrativ unit */județul Tulcea*) (Figure 1), a farm worker growing tobacco in 1911 discovered a "silver vase" with some gold objects (Burda 1979, 71, no. 53; Custurea and Talmațchi 2011, 266, no. 86,II; Diaconu 1983; Gramatopol and Theodorescu 1966, 75, no. 124; Iliescu 1987; Knechtel 1920; Moisil 1911, 1920, 1923).

The complex suffered the same fate as many accidentally discovered hoards of precious metals: some parts

remained with the finder, others ended up in private collections, others in museums, in this case mostly in Bucharest (Figure 2). Fortunately, old photos are available of most of the objects that did not make their way into museums (Figure 3), so that the main features of the treasure's composition can be reconstructed. We are particularly indebted to Constantin Moisil, then-director of the Numismatic Cabinet of the Romanian Academy in Bucharest, for his important reports, which were, however, often presented in publications difficult to access (Moisil 1911, 1920, 1923). This probably is why the Suluc treasure was largely forgotten, though some of the objects occasionally were mentioned in regional literature. Ten years ago, the six items in the National History Museum in Bucharest were published very succinctly in an impressive exhibition catalogue (Figure 2), but that did not help the treasure to achieve greater fame (Oanță-Marghitu 2014).

Figure 1. Location of the Suluc site.
Graphic: Michael Ober, LEIZA Mainz.



Figure 2. Suluc: the preserved finds from the Muzeul Național de Istorie a României (Bucharest). Collection of the Muzeul Național de Istorie a României, © MNIR 2023, photo: Marius Amarie.

We begin very briefly with the objects that were laid down in Suluc. There are at least four coins: three *aurei* of Gallienus and one of Hostilian (see Quast 2023, 51–53). We cannot go into numismatic details here; it may suffice to say that the coins provide a terminus post quem of AD 266/268. What is of interest is that all coins were perforated; in the case of Hostilian's aureus, the holes had been filled again with gold, only for the coin to be perforated again later at another place. This indicates that the coins were worn as jewellery.

A small, approximately 6cm high gold emperor's bust deserves special attention (Figure 3,6). Unfortunately, its whereabouts are unknown, but there are two old photos and a description. Small gold busts like this are extremely rare, with only three comparative finds known to me. Their mounting in largition bowls as well as the use on military standards are discussed for the emperor busts made of gold or silver (de Pury-Gysel 2017; Künzl 1983; Töpfer 2011, 73–75). The Suluc bust has an eyelet at the top of the head, to which two chain links are attached. It is very likely that this suspension was secondary. Assuming that it is the emperor's head detached from a bust, it could well be regarded as a kind of “trophy” that was worn as a pendant.

Unfortunately, it is not possible on the basis of the photo to determine which Roman emperor is represented in the little head from Suluc. Ernst Künzl, a profound expert on Roman emperor portraits, wrote to me that in his opinion, it most likely is Decius (249–251 AD), who in June 251 fell in battle against the Goths (heterogeneous groups of warriors from large parts of the Barbaric world) at Abrittus (today Razgrad, Bulgaria).

Among the objects unusual in a treasure find from the eastern part of the Roman Empire are the two Leuna-type silver cups (Figure 2,1–2). Although they are a pair, the two examples from Suluc are of different sizes and decoration. Fourteen comparable silver cups are known to date, but they originate exclusively from the west of the Roman Empire and from adjacent *Barbaricum* (Niemeyer 2004). They are dated to the 3rd century, which is supported by glass vessels of similar shape and ornamentation, such as the Eggers 216 and 218 cut-glass cups (Eggers 1951, pl. 15).

Looking more closely at the two silver cups from Suluc, we see that they feature decorative elements that do not exist in this form in the West (which may be due to the fact that so few of these cups are known to date; cf. Quast 2023, 57, fig. 5). The hatched framing of the indentations and the small cones soldered in their centres are striking. But whether the Suluc cups are of eastern production remains unclear and seems rather unlikely: they

usually are regarded as products of Gallic workshops that did not find an empire-wide distribution. It thus appears that they found their way into the ground at a place far from their production area.

A gold crossbow brooch (Figure 3,7) of Pröttel's Type 1a dates to the last third of the 3rd century, which fits well with the coins (Pröttel 1988, 349–53, 372, fig. 11; Schierl 2016, 535–36). The two gold arm rings (Figure 2,3–4) and the fragments of a gold necklace (Figure 3,1–2) with a round clasp (Figure 2,5) can also be dated to this period (Oanță-Marghitu 2014; Quast 2023, 59–60, 64).

The Scandinavian snake-head arm ring

The most surprising item from Suluc is merely a fragment, made of gold and about 2cm long, that features a cylindrical middle section decorated with parallel grooves that give the impression of it being wrapped in smooth wire (Figures 2,6,4); the reverse is completely smooth. The upper end is formed by a mushroom-shaped knob, the lower end by a flat semicircular shape (Figure 4,2). The fragment is cast in solid gold and weighs a little less than 10g. So far, it has been interpreted as part of a gold crossbow brooch (Gramatopol and Theodorescu 1966, 75, no. 127; Oanță-Marghitu 2014, 454, no. 104.2), but this seems unlikely to me. The fact that the fragment is solidly cast speaks against such an assumption, because the known gold crossbow brooches are made “hollow” (Drescher 1959, 177–79, fig. 3) and their knobs were not cast with the body, but attached (Boube 1960, 347, fig. 6). Varieties made of bronze or lead, on the other hand, frequently are solidly cast, as shown by faulty castings and moulds (Drescher 1959, 171–77, fig. 1; Mackensen and Schimmer 2013, 285–91, figs. 133–134). The exquisite gold brooches were defined by the high quality of their material and the high level of production and craftsmanship. In comparison, the fragment from Suluc seems almost “clumsy” with its decorations of parallel grooves. It has no equivalent in the numerous known crossbow brooches, regardless of their material (see Pröttel 1988; Quast 2015; Soupault 2003; Steuer 2007; Swift 2000, 13–88).

Based on the shape of the knob, the groove decoration, the size, and the manufacturing technique of the Suluc fragment, a reconstruction other than that of a crossbow brooch can be suggested, viz. that it is the terminal piece of a Scandinavian snake-head arm ring of Hildebrand's Type C or Przybyła's Type 2M (Hildebrand 1873, 28, fig. 9; Przybyła 2021, 25, fig. 18).

The snake-head ring from Kvinnsgröta, Öland, Sweden (Figure 6,1), has the same grooved decoration on the front as the fragment from Suluc (Andersson 1993, 192,

Figure 3. Suluc: old black-and-white photo of the lost finds. After Moisil 1923, 68–69, figs. 4, 5.

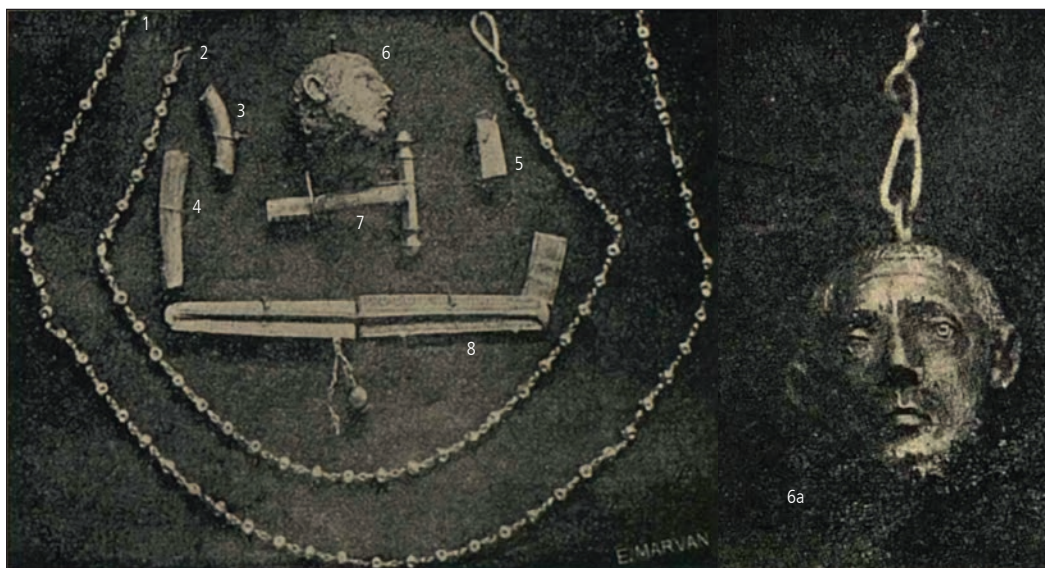


Figure 4. Suluc: fragment of a gold Scandinavian snake-head arm ring. 1. Collection of the Muzeul Național de Istorie a României, inv. no. P23483 © MNIR 2023, photo: Marius Amarie. 2. After Gramatopol and Theodorescu 1966, pl. XX,4.

no. 1014, 1995, 73, fig. 50); one of the rings from Skedemosse, also Öland, not only shares this decoration, but also the shape of the button of the Suluc find (Andersson 1993, 189 no. 1003; Hagberg 1967, vol. 1, 52–53, no. F 270, fig. 40, right, pl. 1, top left, vol. 2, 10, fig. 4) (Figure 6,2). Type-C snake-head arm rings mainly are known from Uppland, Öland, and Gotland in Sweden, as well as from Funen and Zealand in Denmark, but there are isolated rings from Central Germany and Poland, as well (Andersson 1995, 70, fig. 47; Przybyła 2021, fig. 2) (Figure 5). The oldest of them date to Period C1b (ca. 210–260

AD), but most rings belong to Period C2 (ca. 260–310 AD) (Andersson 1995, 78–79; Przybyła 2021, figs. 2, 5). Thus, such a ring would chronologically fit well into the treasure from Suluc.

Knowledge of two other gold fragments among the Suluc treasure survives only through an old black-and-white photo. The pieces are described by Constantin Moisil as “two narrow gold blades (probably fragments of a brooch) [...] decorated on the edges with geometric figures carved with great skill. They consist of a series of semicircles filled with groups of three beads each” (Moisil 1923, 67, no. 5, fig. 5, author’s translation) (Figure 3,8). In the photo, two long rectangular fragments with almost parallel sides can be seen that seem to fit together. There is a clear ridge running down their middles, which is a very characteristic feature of the band-shaped sections of snake-head rings (e.g. Przybyła 2021, figs. 13,8–10, 15, 16–18) (Figure 6). Accordingly, they very well might be two more fragments of the snake-head arm ring. The row of semicircular punch marks on the rim also fits well with this notion as well as the ring’s dimensions (Andersson 1995, 183, fig. 201; Przybyła 2021, 10, fig. 4). It is not possible, however, to make a reliable assessment on the basis of the old photo.

Two features speak against this interpretation. On the one hand, there is an apparently smooth rectangular plate on the right edges of the two fragments, approximately at right angles. Secondly, in the photo, three very small semicircular extensions can be seen on the lower edge. To the middle one, two fine little chains are attached, one of which has a gold bead at the end. Both features are unknown in snake-head arm rings, but they might be explained as secondary reworkings, which can also be found on other objects from the treasure of Suluc.

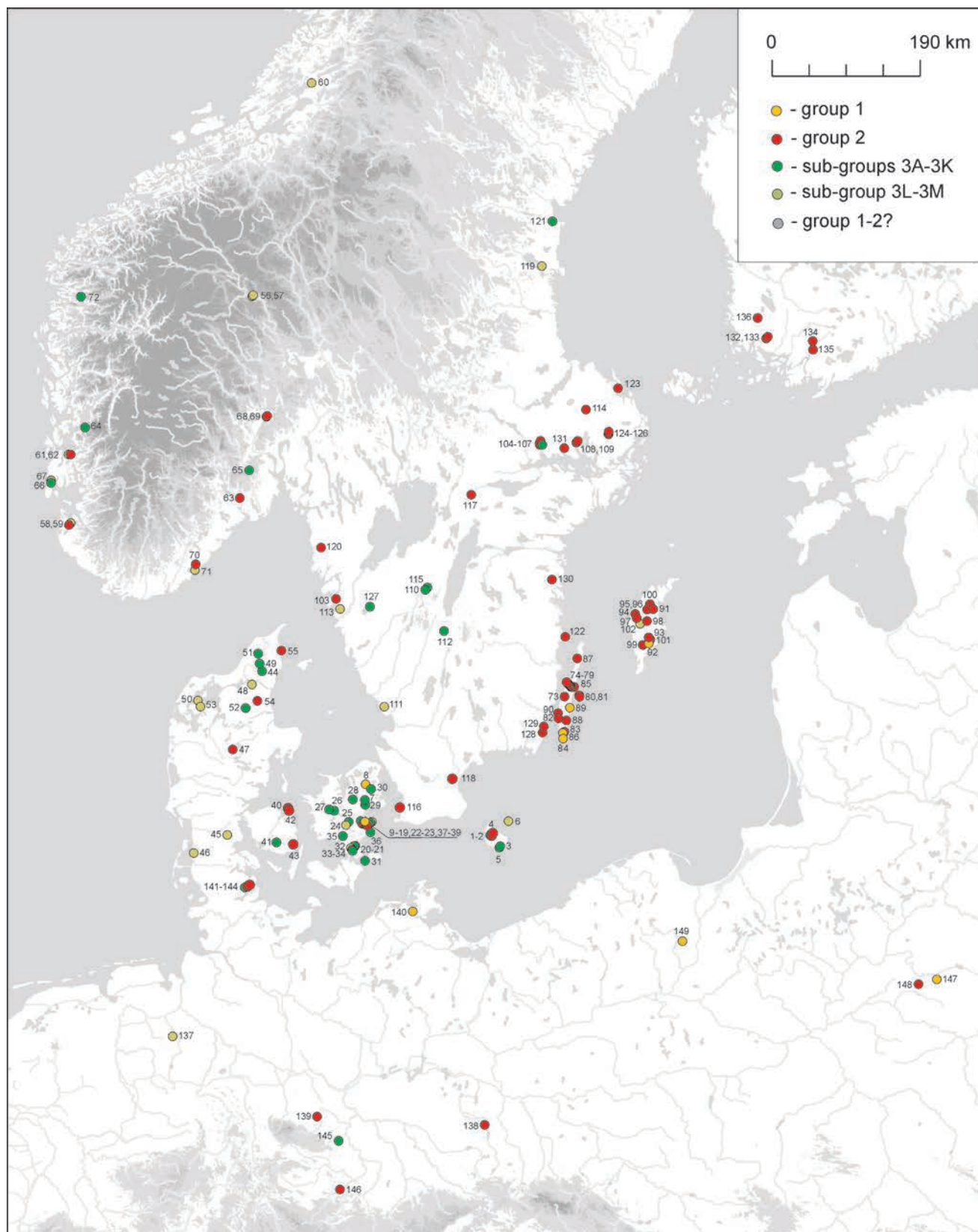


Figure 5. Distribution of the Scandinavian snake-head arm rings (groups 1 and 2) and finger rings (group 3). Suluc is not mapped. After Przybyła 2021, 5, fig. 2. With kind permission by Marzena Przybyła.

The historical context of the find

Finally, I would like to put the treasure find from Suluc into a historical context, beginning with a short preliminary summary. The treasure from Suluc was deposited in the last third of the 3rd century AD. However, it is striking that some of the objects at that time already were in second- or even third-hand use, namely the coins and the small emperor's head and possibly also the Scandinavian snake-head arm ring. The coins and the bust head obviously were worn as jewellery or as "trophies". This was a custom in the Roman Empire, as well, but there, the coins were usually given an opulent setting. A simple perforation as seen on the Suluc coins is mostly found beyond the imperial border.

The treasure from Suluc does not exclusively consist of trophies. The objects originating from distant regions are also striking, such as the Leuna-type silver cups and the gold Scandinavian snake-head arm ring. All this gives the complex a heterogeneous character. The composition of elements from the male and female worlds is equally striking. All objects are of high material value, but some have been reworked and probably were deposited in the ground in fragmentary condition. All in all, the Suluc treasure looks like a collection of loot that was buried by its owner.

It is quite likely (but impossible to prove) that the treasure is connected with the numerous Gothic incursions into the Roman Empire during the second half of the 3rd century. Aleksander Bursche studied the numerous coinages of Decius in *Barbaricum* to determine their distribution to describe the catchment area of the Gothic commander Cniva at the battle of Abrittus in AD 251 (Bursche 2013, pl. 34; Bursche and Myzgin 2020; Quast 2023, 65–68).² Perhaps the fragment of the snake-head arm ring from Suluc indicates that there were Scandinavian units active in the Gothic wars as well. Over 30 years ago, Joachim Werner described contacts between Funen and the Černjachov culture in western Ukraine, Moldova, and eastern Romania from the middle of the 3rd to the end of the 4th centuries (Werner 1988; cf. Myzgin 2019). Hoards of snake-head arm rings of Type Hildebrand C on the continent at least suggest Scandinavian activity further south (Figure 5) (Przybyła 2021, 5, fig. 2). An example of this type in south-eastern Europe therefore is not at all surprising.

News of victorious invasions into the Roman Empire during this period must have triggered enormous dynamics. Word of the campaigns, such as those of 238 and 250 AD, spread throughout *Barbaricum* and the area of today's western Ukraine and became a rallying point that attracted warrior groups of different origins with



Figure 6. 1. Snake-head arm rings rings from Kvinnsgårda (Öland, Sweden). Photo: Kalmar läns museum (KLM 28160). 2. Snake-head arm rings from Skedemosse (Öland, Sweden). Photograph: Ulf Bruxe, Statens historiska Museer, Stockholm, SHM 109211; 26239:270, 109211_HST. (CC BY 4.0).

the prospect of success, fame, and booty. For the military commanders, more warriors meant more striking power and thus greater military success, which in turn drew more warriors from *Barbaricum* (for the following, see Quast 2021, 304–6).

Perhaps the situation in Syria and Iraq a little more than 10 years ago is a suitable example for comparison. There, a power vacuum had arisen that various groups sought to exploit for their own ends. The Islamic State ("IS") was particularly successful at times. This made it a centre of attraction for young men from all parts of the world who hoped to find some gains there for which they were willing to risk their lives (Figure 7). This enormous influx in manpower increased the Islamic State's military strength accordingly. The emergence of the Gothic Empire can be explained in a similar way.

Conclusion

The Suluc hoard, discovered in 1911, is very unusual in the Roman Empire due to its composition and probably was deposited by a non-resident. Chronologically, it dates from the period of numerous Gothic incursions into the Roman Empire during the 3rd century. The term "Goths" refers to heterogeneous groups of warriors from large parts of the Barbaric world. The gold ring from Suluc suggests that there were Scandinavians among these groups.



Figure 7. Origin of Islamic State fighters. Map: Michael Ober, LEIZA, Mainz, redrawn from "Spiegel online", Friday 28.11.2014.

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Endnotes

¹I presented the treasure find in detail in the Festschrift for Michel Kazanski (Quast 2023). In this paper, I will focus on the Scandinavian snake-head arm ring.

²Catchment area refers to the area from which the warriors come – and to which they return (with their spoils).