

THE SUCIDAVA TYPE OF BUCKLES AND THE RELATIONS BETWEEN THE LATE ROMAN EMPIRE AND THE BARBARIANS IN THE 6th CENTURY

BY

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Joachim Werner gave the name of this type of buckles because several pieces have been found at Celei-Sucidava when he published his paper (in 1955)¹. These buckles have a shield-shaped plate and are adorned by pierced work with cruciform or crescent motifs or with a human stylized face. Joachim Werner established their dating in second half of the 6th century. Dezső Csallány wrote, few years after, a study on these buckles, focused especially on the pieces with human face². The number of buckles increased very much during the last three decades. Dan Gh. Teodor³ and Sina Uenze⁴ made two typologies in 1991 and 1992. In 1992 Valentin Varsik also published a study about several types of buckles including Sucidava, but he did not propose a typology⁵. In the same year the buckles found in the Lower Danubian area were put together into a repertory by Uwe Fiedler⁶.

The typologies drawn up by S. Uenze and Dan Gh. Teodor are very important for the study of these objects, but we consider possible a more accurate classification. We remind here that S. Uenze classified the Sucidava buckles into five types:

- a) - with a simple cruciform decor;
- b) - a cross with all the arms rounded;
- c) - a cross with the down arm rounded;
- d) - with tangent circles;
- e) - with a human stylized face.

The classification made by D. Gh. Teodor is based on the same criterion of the ornament, but is more coherent:

- a) - without ornament;
- b) - with a simple cross;
- c) - with a cross and a crescent;
- d) - with a cross, a crescent and two lateral perforations;
- e) - with crescents, circle segments and lateral perforations;
- f) - with a human face;
- g) - with various ornaments.

¹ I. Werner, in *Kölner Jahrbuch für Vor- und Frühgeschichte*, 1, 1955, p. 39-40, 45.

² D. Csallány, in *Acta Antiqua ASH*, 10, 1962, 1-3, p. 55-77.

³ D. Gh. Teodor, *Arheologia Moldovei*, 14, 1991, p. 118-125.

⁴ S. Uenze, *Die spätantiken Befestigungen von Sadovec (Bulgarien). Ergebnisse der deutsch-bulgarisch-österreichischen Ausgrabungen (1934-1937)*, München, 1992, p. 184-187, 598-599.

⁵ V. Varsik, in *SlovArch*, 40, 1992, 1, p. 78, 80.

⁶ U. Fiedler, *Studien zu Gräberfeldern des 6. bis 9. Jahrhunderts an der unteren Donau*, Bonn, 1992, p. 71-73. We also made a repertory in our book (Al. Madgearu, *Continuitate și discontinuitate culturală la Dunărea de Jos în secolele VII-VIII*, București, 1997), p. 39.

We consider that the shield-shaped buckles without decoration do not belong to the Sucidava type because this type is defined by a certain decoration. It is true that these buckles (for instance, the piece found in the B 59 grave of Beroe⁷) are related to the Sucidava buckles and they could be even regarded as prototypes, but the typology could not include them.

On the other hand, if we take into consideration the criterion of the ornamentation, than we must observe that the Sucidava buckles are defined by combinations of three basic motifs: the cross, the crescent and the human face. The most frequent is the cross. This is the reason why we propose the following typology:

I. *Buckles with cruciform pierced work:*

- a) - with a straight cross, without crescent;
- b) - with a straight cross and with crescent;
- c) - with a rounded cross, without crescent;
- d) - with a cross with one or more rounded arms and with a crescent;
- e) - with a cross, a crescent and lateral perforations.

II. *Buckles without cruciform pierced work:*

- a) - with two vertical crescents;
- b) - with a crescent or an oval, without cross but with perforations;
- c) - with a human face;
- d) - with a very stylized and distorted human face.

The advantage of our typology is the grouping of all pieces with cruciform decor into a single class. Several researches affirmed that the Sucidava buckles had a Christian signification⁸. It is obvious that the craftsmen who produced these buckles in the Roman-Byzantine workshops considered the cruciform ornament a Christian symbol. In the same time, we could not be sure that all the men who bore them do this because of their symbolic value. It is probable that some of these buckles appertained to men who were not Christians and who used them only because their function. By this reason, we do not agree the interpretation of the Sucidava buckles found north of the Danube as Christian testimonies⁹.

In the previous repertories, some belt accessories with similar ornament were also included. Because these are other objects, with different function, we decided to make different catalogues, based on the same typological criteria.

We classified all the buckles found in the Middle and Lower Danubian area about which we have enough information. The territory studied includes also Transylvania and Moldavia as adjacent regions. The whole spreading area of the Sucidava buckles is very large (Greece, Minor Asia, Crimea, Italy, Spain, France and even Britain). Most of them are concentrated in the Danubian regions, especially on the *limes*. It was already observed that these buckles are specific for the Danubian *limes*¹⁰. The total number of the buckles we have studied is 114. From these, 25 were found in Scythia Minor, 40 in Moesia Secunda, 13 in Dacia Ripensis, 5 in Moesia Prima, 12 in the North-Danubian bridgeheads, 7 in Pannonia, 6 in Banat and near the confluence Mureş-Tisa, 3 in Transylvania, 3 in Moldavia. We add also 14 belt accessories related to the Sucidava buckles: 8 from Scythia, 4 from Dacia Ripensis, 2 from Orşovă.

In this paper, we are studying only some aspects implied by the research of these objects. It is only a preliminary inquiry. The first aspect was just stated: the above presented classification. This was made taking into consideration also the pieces found outside the area studied in this paper. One could observe that the number of variants is not very big. This means that these objects were produced into a small number of workshops. It is probable that some of these workshops were located at Constantinople. Only in this way could be explained their spreading everywhere in the Roman-Byzantine Empire and outside. Of course, other workshops existed in the Lower Danubian provinces where many pieces were found. The archaeological researches did not discover anyone but it is known a workshop, at Caričin Grad, where some shield-shaped belt accessories were produced (a type akin with the Sucidava one)¹¹.

The second problem discussed here is the chronology of the various variants of buckles of Sucidava type. We consider that our typology could lighten the dating because the descendance of a type from another

⁷ A. Petre, *La romanité en Scythie Mineure (I^e - VI^e siècles de notre ère)*. Recherches archéologiques, Bucharest, 1987, p. 68, pl. 122 bis/190 b.

⁸ I. Werner, *op. cit.*, p. 40; D. Gh. Teodor, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

⁹ See for instance D. Gh. Teodor, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

¹⁰ V. Varsik, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

¹¹ B. Bavant, in *Caričin Grad II. Le quartier sud-ouest de la ville haute*, ed. par B. Bavaut, V. Kondić, J. M. Spieser, Belgrade-Rome, 1990, p. 220-224.

becomes more clear. For instance, it seems obvious that the human face buckles developed from the buckles with perforations placed lateral to the cross (type I e). The perforations become the eyes of the face (type II c). The I e type evolved from the buckles with a less complicate decor (only with a cross or with cross and crescent).

We propose the following evolution: the I a type (straight cross) is the most ancient. From this first type derived the variants with cross and with crescent (I b, I d, I e). The type I c (with rounded crosses) could be created in the same time with I a. From I d derived II c and from this one, II d. The types II a and II b evolved from the types decorated with cross and crescent.

D. Csallány believed that the pieces adorned with a human face are earlier than the cruciforms¹². Our typology proves the contrary. Uwe Fiedler expressed the same opinion about the supposition of Csallány, but he considers that a cronology of all the variants is impossible¹³.

An important observation is that the II b type is an intermediary form between the Sucidava buckles and the Pécs buckles. One could observe how the latter are evolving form the II b type. At the genesis of the Pécs type participated perhaps also the II d type. This one, II d, survived in the 7th century. In the 67 grave from the cemetery of Gyód, the Sucidava buckle of II b type is associated with a Pécs buckle and with another of Gátér type. Although the whole cemetery is generally dated in the second half of the 7th century¹⁴, this grave could be earlier, from the first or the second third of the century.

An absolute chronology of the various types could not be precisely established now, but we have some guide-marks. The single certain fact is the appearance of the variants with human faces (II c and II d) before the '80ies of the 6th century. Such pieces were found in closed contextes, dated before 580-590. At Sadovec-Golemanovo Kale was discovered a II c buckle (objet B 40). This fortress was destroyed around 586 or perhaps in 595-596¹⁵. Another evidence is given by a II d buckle from a treasure hidden into a water basin in Scupi, Macedonia. This town (moved from present Skoplje to Vodno after the earthquake of 518) was ravaged by the Slavic invasion of 586 when the hoard was hidden¹⁶. A buckle decorated with a human stylised face is recorded in the fortress Kamen Brijag which was also destroyed by the Slavic inroads in the '70ies or in the first years of Maurikios' reign¹⁷. Finally, another evidence is brought by a belt accessory with human face from Histria. It was discovered in the pavement of the road β from the central sector (not on the street but in the grave). The street level belongs to the reconstruction made after the fire of 593 (in the same pavement was also found a coin from 589)¹⁸. The belt accessory should be dated prior to 593.

Therefore, the models with human face appeared before the '80ies. This is a very important evidence for our next statements.

The production of the cruciform buckles continued after the appearance of the human face variants. In some cases these objets were discovered together, like at Beroe (B 45 grave)¹⁹. The cruciform buckles survived until the 7th century. A piece was found at Tropaeum, on the VI B level (dated in the first decades of the 7th century)²⁰.

If we consider that the human face variants are later, than the location of this cathogory of buckles could indicate chronological differences in the spreading of the Sucidava type of buckles.

We have no clear evidence about the beginning of the production of the Sucidava buckles. It is possible that were first produced before the middle of the 6th century. A piece of I e type was found in the fortress Mokranjske Stene in Dacia Ripensis, into a site where all the coins are dated before the middle of the 6th century²¹.

It must be paid attention to the fact that the Sucidava buckles (like other types from the 6th-7th centuries) were pieces of the Roman-Byzantine military equipment. The use of the buckles and belts was established by

¹² J. Csallány, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

¹³ U. Fiedler, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

¹⁴ A. Kiss, *Cemeteries of the Avar Period (567-829)*, in *Hungary 2. Avar Cemeteries in County Baranya*, Budapesta, 1977, p. 41, Taf. IX/67/4.

¹⁵ S. Uenze, *op. cit.*, p. 599, nr. 59. See p. 119, 292-294 and 417 for the destruction of the fortress.

¹⁶ I. Mikulčik, *Staro Skopje so okoluite*, Skopje, 1982, p. 51-52, fig. 26. See also V. Varsik, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

¹⁷ A. Salkin, D. Toptanov, in *Dobrudža. Etudes ethno-culturelles*, Sofia, 1987, p. 32-33.

¹⁸ I. Stoian, M. Sâmpetru, in *Materiale*, 9, 1970, p. 189-190, fig. 9/4.

¹⁹ A. Petre, *op. cit.*, p. 69, pl. 126.

²⁰ I. Bogdan-Cătănciu, Al. Barnea, in *Tropaeum Traiani*, vol. I, *Cetatea*, București, 1979, p. 192, fig. 174/10. 7.

²¹ M. Sretenović, in *Cahiers des Portes de Fer*, 2, 1984, p. 229-230, fig. 216/5.

military regulations. The Pseudo-Maurikios *Strategikon* contains about belts²². The military character of the Sucidava buckles is proved by their spreading especially in the fortresses located on the *limes* or inside the provinces.

In this case, the existence of some of pieces outside the Empire must be explained.

There are not too many Sucidava buckles in Barbaricum, but their existence should be taken into consideration. We know 19 pieces discovered in the regions north of the Danube:

- 1) *Alba-Iulia*, Alba County, Romania: from the 6th century settlement located in the former Roman camp; type I b; R. R. Heitel, *SCIVA*, 37, 1986, 3, 239-240, fig. 2/1; D. Gh. Teodor, *op. cit.*, p. 121, fig. 1/2; V. Varsik, *op. cit.*, 1992.
- 2) *Borniş*, Neamţ County, Romania: from a 6th century settlement, house 25; type I a; R. Popovici, *Arheologia Moldovei*, 12, 1988, p. 249-251, fig. 1/2; D. Gh. Teodor, *op. cit.*, 1991, p. 118, fig. 1/3; V. Varsik, *op. cit.*, 1992, p. 90, nr. 5.
- 3) *Bratei*, Sibiu County, Romania: from the Gepidic cemetery nr. 3; type I; D. Gh. Teodor, *op. cit.*, 1991, p. 121, fig. 2/1.
- 4) *Dăneşti*, Vaslui County, Romania: from an inhumation grave, W-E oriented; type I d; D. Gh. Teodor, *op. cit.*, p. 121, fig. 2/7; V. Varsik, *op. cit.*, p. 90, nr. 14.
- 5) *Gyód-Máriahegy*, Baranya County, Hungary: from an early Avar cemetery, grave 67; type II b; A. Kiss, *op. cit.*, 1977, p. 41, Taf. IX/67/4; V. Varsik, *op. cit.*, p. 90, nr. 17.
- 6) *Hódmezővásárhely-Kishomok*, Csongrád County, Hungary: from a Gepidic cemetery, grave 65; type I b; I. Bóna, *À l'aube du Moyen Âge. Gépides et Lombards dans le bassin des Carpathes*, Budapest, 1976, p. 115-116, fig. 8; V. Varsik, *op. cit.*, p. 90, nr. 18.
- 7) *Jánoshida-Tótképuszta*, Szolnok County, Hungary: from an early Avar cemetery, grave 55 (female); type I b; D. Csallány, *op. cit.*, 1962, p. 56, nr. 9, Taf. 2/8; V. Varsik, *op. cit.*, p. 91, nr. 21.
- 8) *Keszthely-Fenekpuszta 1*, Zala County, Hungary: from a destroyed cemetery; type II b; K. Sági, "Acta Antiqua Al H", 9, 1961, 3-4, p. 343, Taf. XVIII/2; V. Varsik, *op. cit.*, p. 91, nr. 24.
- 9) *Keszthely-Fenekpuszta 2*, Zala County, Hungary: from a destroyed cemetery; type II b; K. Sági, *op. cit.*, Taf. XVIII/3; V. Varsik, *op. cit.*, p. 91, nr. 25.
- 10) *Kláralfalva*, Csongrád County, Hungary: from an early Avar cemetery, grave 25; type I e; D. Csallány, *op. cit.*, p. 56, nr. 8, Taf. 2/7; V. Varsik, *op. cit.*, p. 91, nr. 26.
- 11) *Magyarcsanak-Bökény*, Csongrád County, Hungary: from a Gepidic cemetery, grave 4; type II b; D. Csallány, *Archäologische Denkmäler der Gepiden im Mittel donäubecken (454-568 v.z.)*, Budapest, 1961, p. 141, Taf. CLIX/6; V. Varsik, *op. cit.*, p. 91, nr. 41.
- 12) *Mokrin*, Banat, Yugoslavia: from an early Avar cemetery, grave 60 (female); type II b; D. Csallány, *op. cit.*, 1962: 56, nr. 10; V. Varsik, *op. cit.*, p. 91, nr. 45.
- 13) *Noşlac*, Alba County, Romania: from a Gepidic cemetery, grave 10; type I b; M. Rusu, *Dacia*, N.S., 6, 1962, p. 279, fig. 2/35; D. Gh. Teodor, *op. cit.*, p. 121, fig. 1/10; V. Varsik, *op. cit.*, p. 91, nr. 47.
- 14) *Pecica*, Arad County, Romania: from a destroyed Gepidic cemetery; type I d; D. Csallány, *op. cit.*, 1961, p. 144, Taf. CCXIII/13; D. Gh. Teodor, *op. cit.*, p. 121, fig. 2/3; V. Varsik, *op. cit.*, p. 91, nr. 57; M. Barbu, "Ziridava", 19-20, 1996, p. 91-93.
- 15) *Szentes-Nagyhegy*, Csongrád County, Hungary: from a Gepidic cemetery, grave 29; type I d; D. Csallány, *op. cit.*, 1961, p. 50-51, Taf. XXV/13; V. Varsik, *op. cit.*, p. 91, nr. 112.
- 16) *Szőreg 1*, Csongrád County, Hungary: from a Gepidic cemetery, grave XI; type I b; Csallány, *op. cit.*, 1961, p. 148-149, Taf. CLXXXVIII/2; V. Varsik, *op. cit.*, p. 91, nr. 113.
- 17) *Szőreg 2*, Csongrád County, Hungary: from a Gepidic cemetery, grave 103; type I a; Csallány, *op. cit.*, 1961, p. 165, Taf. CLXXX/4; V. Varsik, *op. cit.*, p. 91, nr. 114.
- 18) *Ştefan cel Mare*, Bacău County, Romania: from a 6th century settlement, house 17; type I d; I. Mitrea, C. Eminovici, in *Cronica cercetărilor arheologice 1983-1992, A XXXI-a sesiune națională de rapoarte arheologie*, Bucureşti, 1997, p. 105-106, nr. 70.
- 19) *Tatabánya*, Komárom County, Hungary: from a Longobardic cemetery; unknown type (not published); V. Varsik, *op. cit.*, p. 91, nr. 115.

Therefore, eight pieces were found in Gepidic cemeteries and other four in early Avar graves. The female graves from Jánoshida-Tótképuszta and Mokrin could be ascribed to Gepidic women. The buckles from Gyód

²² Mauricii, in *Strategicon*, X. 8. 1. 3 (ed. H. Mihăescu, Bucharest, 1970, p. 315).

and Szöreg nr. 2 belong to graves with weapons (swords). Other pieces were found into a cemetery where there are some Longobardic elements, but which could ascribed to the Romanic population of Pannonia (Keszthely). A single buckle comes from a Longobardic cemetery. The pieces from Szöreg and Szentcsanak were discovered in the earlier areas of the cemeteries, dated before 567²³. Three pieces were discovered in Romanic settlements. The buckle from Dănești comes from an isolated inhumation grave, most probably Christian. The evidence about it is given by Dan Gh. Teodor in several of his studies, but it should be observed that this grave is not mentioned in the archaeological repertory of the Vaslui County, in the chapter about the village Dănești²⁴.

The facts presented above are showing that the Sucidava buckles found in Pannonia and Transylvania belonged especially to the Gepidae. The Gepidae were for a long time the allies of the Roman-Byzantine Empire. They occupied Sirmium in 536, but the relations turned to peace after 539/540 when Justinian granted again the subsidia (with the purpose to protect the northern frontier). After the Lombard-Gepidic wars of 549-552, Justinian forced the Gepidae to return the lands conquered south of the Danube. The alliance lasted in 566 when the Gepidic king Cunimund refused to give the city of Sirmium, although he promised it one year before when he asked for help against the Lombards²⁵. The relations between the Empire and the masters of Pannonia were kept also after 567, because the new masters, the Avars, remained for few years the allies of the Romans. Baian attacked in 573 the Byzantine army and after his victory he obtained a tribute of 80.000 solidi. The amount of the payments increased after each Avar victory²⁶.

We suppose that the Sucidava buckles were received as gifts by the Gepidae and next by the Avars. During the 4th century some pieces of military equipment and insigns (belt buckles, gold and silver fibulae with onion-shape extremities - *Zwiebelknopffibeln*) were offered as gifts by the Roman Empire to the Barbarian chiefs or to the leaders of the local communities in post-Roman Dacia²⁷. We suppose a similar situation in the 6th century.

The geographical spreading of the findings is very interesting. The buckles are few in Roman Pannonia (west of the Danube). The most part of the pieces were discovered near the confluence Mureș-Tisa (8 or even 9, if we add the piece of Jánoshida). Another group is located in the central Transylvania and another in the middle part of Moldavia. It is known that the main power centre of the Gepidic kingdom was placed near the mouth of Mureș and especially north of it. In that region a great number of Gepidic cemeteries with rich inventory was found²⁸. This region was the first conquered by the Avars. Like the Gepidae, they kept it as a main power centre because they want to control the trade of the salt extracted in Transylvania. We note here that the buckles found in Transylvania were discovered near the salt mines.

Therefore, the spreading of the Sucidava buckles in the Gepidic and the early Avar milieu could be explained in the same way like the presence of the gold Byzantine coins or of other Byzantine luxury goods. As military insigns, these buckles were considered *prestige* objects. Their presence in Gepidic and Avar graves testifies the reception of the Byzantine fashion among the Barbarian warriors.

The Moldavian group of Sucidava buckles could be explained in a similar way. Their concentration into a small region is very strange if we observe that such objects were not discovered in the well-known 6th century settlements of Wallachia (except the Byzantine bridgeheads). We suggest that the Moldavian buckles came here as gifts for the Antae, as a consequence of the long alliance established between them and the Empire, since 546²⁹. The alliance is attested until the year 600. The hiding of the coin hoard from Horgești (closed with coins issued in 597/598) was explained as a testimony of the Avar attack against the Antae, the friends of the Byzantines³⁰. The hoard was found in the area of the Sucidava buckles.

Some of the buckles found in Barbaricum were produced in local workshops. For instance the piece of Borniș whose plate is unusual. It is very probable that this buckle was produced somewhere in central Moldavia, because workshops for bronze objects of Byzantine are known in the neighbourhood fashion (at

²³ K. Horedt, *Siebenbürgen im Frühmittelalter*, Bonn, 1986, p. 31.

²⁴ G. Coman, *Statormicie, continuitate. Repertoriul arheologic al județului Vaslui*, București, 1980, p. 100-103.

²⁵ F. E. Wozniak, in *Balkan Studies*, 80, 1979, 1, p. 146-155; W. Pohl, *Die Awaren*, München, 1988, p. 51.

²⁶ See A. Madgearu, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

²⁷ A. Diaconescu, C. Opreanu, in *Anuarul Institutului de Istorie și Arheologie, Cluj-Napoca*, 29, 1989, p. 581-582.

²⁸ I. Bóna, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

²⁹ See A. Madgearu, in *Balkan Studies*, 33, 1992, 2, p. 203-208.

³⁰ V. Popović, *Comptes Rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions*, Paris, 1978, 3, p. 626.

Davideni and Bacău-Curtea Domneasă)³¹. The buckles found at Keszthely-Fenekpuszta (type I b) are also quite different from the pieces known in the Empire. It is known that at Kesthely and in the nearby area survived until the 7th century several Roman workshops for producing bronze and gold objects³². The Pécs type buckles (also named Keszthely-Pécs) are deriving from the Sucidava type II b and are a creation of a Pannonian workshops.

The buckles are the belt accessories with human face (II c and II d) were discovered only on the territory of the Roman-Byzantine Empire, especially in Dacia Ripensis, Moesia Secunda and Scythia. Their absence in Barbaricum is significant. We think that this was due to the interruption or to the diminishing of the penetration of the buckles, in the period when appeared the types II c and II d. This fact could happen because the Byzantine-Avar wars of 573-602.

The 6th century gold Byzantine coins (*solidi*) discovered north of the Danube (in Wallachia, Moldavia, and also in Transylvania and Banat) are issued especially under Justinian. Pieces from Justin II and Tiberius II are known only from Mănăstirea and Găești (both in Dâmbovița County, in Central Wallachia)³³.

Radu R. Heitel wrote in his paper about the findings of Alba Iulia that the interruption of the spreading of the Sucidava buckles was one of the first consequences of the Avar inroads; he dated this fact around 582 when Baian conquered Sirmium³⁴. This opinion is confirmed by all the North-Danubian discoveries.

The pieces found in later sites, dated in the last quarter of the 6th century and in the 7th century could be local artifacts (type II b in the workshops of the Keszthely) or objects remained in use for a long time.

A task for the future researches will be to establish a more accurate chronology of the Gepidic and Avar graves where the Suvidava buckles were found.

The careful inquiry of the Sucidava buckles are belt accessories could bring various data about the Byzantine-Barbarian relations and about the 6th-7th century civilization in the peripheral area of the Roman-Byzantine Empire.

³¹ See I. Mitrea, in *SCIIVA*, 30, 1979, 2, p. 145-162; idem, in *Pontica*, 28-29, 1995-1996, p. 228-231 for the latest findings.

³² A. Madgearu, in *SCIIVA*, 44, 1993, 2, p. 171-183; V. Ibler, in *Arheološki Vestnik*, Ljubljana, 43, 1992, p. 135-148.

³³ V. M. Butnariu, in *BSNR*, 77-79, 1983-1985 (1986), nr. 131-133, p. 220, nr. 81 (Mănăstirea); Gh. Poenaru, in *Dacia*, N.S., 37, 1993, p. 316, nr. 71 (Găești - from a hoard with unknown composition).

³⁴ R. R. Heitel, *op. cit.*, p. 239-240.