

**A large belt buckle inlaid with garnet and lapis lazuli**  
**Visigothic Spain**  
**c. 550-600 CE**



*13.4 x 6.1 x 2.6 cm; Copper alloy with garnets, glass, lapis lazuli, and cuttlefish bone. Some replaced inlays.*

*Provenance*

S.Benzaquen Family, Gibraltar, 1960s;  
 Private Collection, New York, by 1981

*Exhibited*

Exhibited: Museo Nacional in Mexico City, 1993  
 The Meadows Museum, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas, September 11-  
 November 9, 1992.

*Published*

*Spain: A Heritage Rediscovered BC 300- AD 711*, New York, 1992, no. 159

This extremely large bronze buckle, inlaid with a dazzling combination of garnets, lapis lazuli, green glass and cuttlefish bone set over gold foil, belongs to a class of object that epitomises more than any other the incredible dexterity of Visigothic goldsmiths working in Spain in the late sixth century. It is thought that buckles of this type were worn on leather belts over women's tunics rather than to secure their mantles – as was the case with the more common fibula buckle type. The buckle's size and rich décor of precious stones would have been a very visible symbol of a woman's high status in Visigothic society.

The Visigoths migrated to the Iberian Peninsula after the fall of the Roman Empire in the early fifth century, establishing a kingdom there by the middle of the 5<sup>th</sup> century. In this early part of their history, the rulers were largely war chiefs and mostly illiterate. However, by the middle of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, King Leovigild (568 – 586) and his son, King Recared (586 – 601), came to power, helping to create a more stable government. The religious reform and cultural flowering that occurred during their reign are often credited to exchanges with the Byzantine court. This new stability was also signified by changes in artistic production, social structures and dress.

This belt buckle, brilliantly preserved with almost all of its inlays intact, represents what is known as the 'Ponto-Gothic' style. Its design, which relates closely to a group of buckles from ancient Septimania (southwest Gaul) now in the Musée de la Société Archéologique, Montpellier, as well as to others in the Museu Arqueològic, Barcelona, revolves around a massive central garnet of pyramidal shape, nimbed with blue lapis inserts and squared off with spandrels of bright white cuttlefish bone. Set on either side of this are two rectangular panels divided by stellate cells and framing them in turn are three concentric borders of varying designs made with elegantly shaped garnet inlays (with green glass added in four places in the outermost frame). Perhaps the most impressive feature of our example is its use of lapis, which may be a reflection of the close relationship between the Visigothic kings and the Byzantine emperors who used the material more regularly. In Visigothic jewellery this is far rarer, and can be found on another example in the Metropolitan Museum in New York (fig. 1). This close relationship might coincide with the mass conversion of the Visigoths to Catholicism under King Recared in 589, when Byzantine influences became predominant.

Although very little art survives from Visigothic Spain, masterpieces of intricate gridwork, such as this belt buckle, are an important part of the kingdom's legacy.



Fig. 1

Inlaid belt buckle

Visigothic Spain

c. 550-600

*1364 x 6 x 2.9 cm; Copper alloy with garnets, glass, lapis lazuli, and cuttlefish bone.*

New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Inv. 1988.305a, b