



Vasa Sacra or Non Sacra? The Aquila Beaker Bearing a Kabbalistic Inscription from the Medieval Hoard from Vinerea, Transylvania

Vasa Sacra o Non Sacra? La inscripci3n cabalística de la Copa de Aquila, del tesoro medieval de Vinerea, Transilvania

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Vasa Sacra ou Non Sacra? A inscriç3o cabalística da Taça de Áquila, do tesouro medieval de Vinerea, Transilvânia

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Abstract: In the middle of the last century, a medieval treasure, made of gold and silver objects, was accidentally discovered in Transylvania on Vinerea (Cugir town). The hoard contained several precious metal objects and several hundred coins, out of which 396 are still preserved today, after a small part was stolen upon discovery. An extremely interesting item is the gold plated silver becker. On its surface was incised a ribbon that contains a text written in Gothic characters – *nceirmoiabedrpma // indecmhpeoirslí*. The text is most likely encrypted, making the message difficult to interpret. Towards the centre the ribbon is interrupted by the presence of a carefully incised aquila. The becker has analogies with similar items from Central Europe, datable around the year 1500. The aquila could be considered as a Christian symbol, in relation with Saint John's (?) iconography.

Keywords: Silver Becker – Aquila symbol – Gothic Kabbalistic Inscription – Middle Ages.

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ISSN 1676-5818

Resumen: A mediados del siglo pasado, un tesoro medieval, hecho de objetos de oro y plata, fue descubierto accidentalmente en Transilvania en Vinerea (ciudad de Cugir). El tesoro contenía varios objetos de metales preciosos y varios cientos de monedas, de las cuales 396 aún se conservan hoy, después de que una pequeña parte fuera robada al ser descubierta. Un artículo muy interesante es una copa de plata bañado en oro. En su superficie estaba grabada una cinta que contiene un texto escrito en caracteres góticos: *necirmoiahedrpma // indecmhpeoirsli*. Lo más probable es que el texto esté encriptado, lo que dificulta la interpretación del mensaje. Hacia el centro, la cinta se interrumpe por la presencia de una aquila cuidadosamente incidido. La copa tiene analogías con elementos similares de Europa Central, datables alrededor del año 1500. El aquila podría considerarse como un símbolo cristiano, posiblemente en relación con la iconografía de San Juan.

Palabras-clave: Copa de plata – Aquila símbolo – Inscripción cabalística gótica – Edad Media.

ENVIADO: 16.07.2021
ACEPTADO: 24.10.2021

I. Information about the hoard from Vinerea

On 11 July 1965, the construction works for a new house in the hearth of the Vinerea village (Hung. Felkenyér; Germ. Ober-Brodsdorf) (Cugir town) led to the discovery of a hoard stored inside a ceramic vessel². It was found in Cutean Ioan's family home yard, while the new foundation was being dug³. The hoard contained several precious metal objects and several hundred coins, out of which 396 are still preserved today⁴,

² The vessel, together with the entire hoard of which it was part, was published in POPA, Cristian Ioan. *Valea Cugirului din preistorie până în zorii epocii moderne. Monumenta Archaeologica et Historica*. Cluj-Napoca: Mega Publishing House, 2011, p. 523-539, 546-554.

³ We came to know the details of the circumstances in which the discovery had been made from the report filed the moment the Vinerea Militia had taken over the hoard from the discoverers.

⁴ The first mention of the hoard was made by Eugen Chirilă and Viorica Pinteá who, based on the information received from Octavian Floca, state that it contained 500 coins, datable beginning with the second half of the 14th century and the first decades of the following century (CHIRILĂ, Eugen,



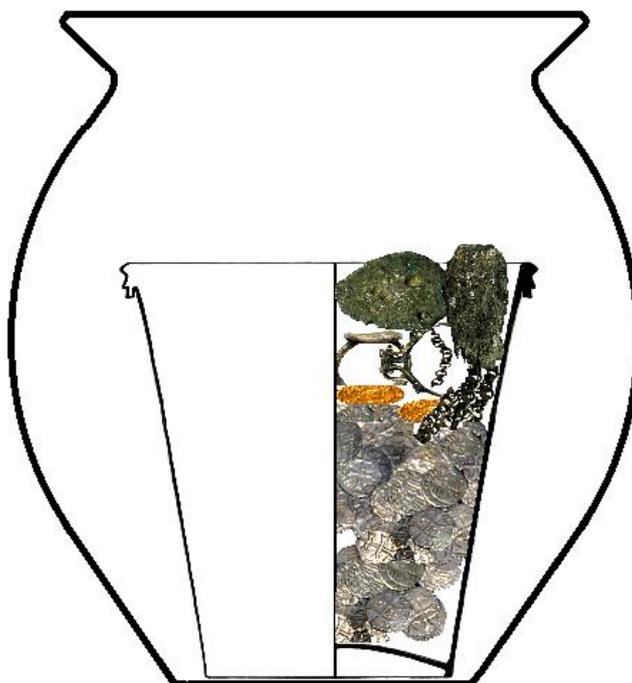
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ISSN 1676-5818

after a small part was stolen upon discovery. After the militia of that time recovered them, the items became part of the collections held by the Orăștie museum⁵.

Figure 1



The medieval hoard from Vinerea: the means of storing the items (reconstruction by C. I. Popa).

PINTEA, Viorica, "Tezaurul de la Enciu (r. Bistrița) sec. XV-XVI". *Apulum* VI (1967): 335, note 8. Subsequently, certain information about the hoard were also given by Iudita Winkler and Mircea D. Lazăr who, based on the information received from the same author, stated that the hoard had been stored inside a clay vessel, containing fragmentary rings, three silver bullions, one gilded silver beaker bearing an inscription, as well as an unspecified number of silver and gold coins. The hoard was dated to the first half of the 15th century (WINKLER, Iudita, LAZĂR, Mircea Dan, „*Emblema legiunii a XIII-a Gemina pe un fragment de umbo*”. *Sargetia* XIII (1977): 267. The latter information corresponds with the ones from the report.

⁵ The Museum from Orăștie received the items through report 101/1965, with the note “Donated by the Militia”.



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The hoard was discovered at a depth of 0,50 m, when the foundation of a new house was dug (Main Street, no. 151⁶), north of its wall, currently towards the yard of house no. 149. In the context of the structure of the current village, it is not far from the village centre, since house no. 149 is on the corner of Nucului Street, which extends to the Cugir River. The place is located at the heart of the medieval centre of Vinerea and, as such, we can state that, during the first decades of the 17th century, when the hoard had been hidden, the premises belonged to a house plot.

The houses in the area still bear the architectural elements from the 18th century, no more than a century after the hoard's uncovering. For instance, the basement of house no. 149, in whose yard the hoard had been found, preserved a wonderful arched cellar from the aforementioned period. Within this cellar, inside a corbel arch, a niche-hideaway was discovered, in which a ceramic vessel, enameled on the inside, was plastered – we could easily suspect that it was used for hiding precious goods in case of danger (**fig. 2**).

By virtue of the information that we received from the discoverers, we can reconstruct the way in which the valuable items had been buried in the ground. All of the items (coins, rings, cylinder, chain, bullions) had been stored in a gilded silver beaker which, in its turn, was placed inside a clay vessel. The items inside the beaker had been placed in a certain order: the coins were at the bottom, then the jewelry, on top of which, as a protective lid, came five silver bullions, some of which are fragmentary (see the reconstruction we proposed in **fig. 1**).

The hoard contained several hundred coins, out of which 396 are still preserved today (made of gold and silver)⁷ (**fig. 6**), as well as three silver rings (**fig. 5**), one bronze chain (?), a fragment of a silver cylinder, five silver bullions, one whole, the rest fragmentary, and the gilded silver beaker bearing iconography and an inscription.

⁶ According to the report, in 1965, the house was no. 45.

⁷ The number of coins differed from the one known today, since some (the ones made of gold) had been stolen upon discovery.



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Figure 2



Vinerea (Main Street, no. 149) – the hiding place for the hoard, in an enamelled ceramic vessel in the 18th century cellar (1 – the niche dug into the arch; 2 – a detail of the ceramic vessel sunken into the wall)

II. “The Aquila Beaker”

The most exquisite item from the hoard is an ornamented, partially gilded silver beaker. The beaker is tronconic in shape, with straight walls, and it was manufactured by hammering a 1-1,5mm thick silver sheet. In its upper part, the lip was bent outwards in the shape of a profiled “cuff”, with three parallel horizontal nervures. The bottom, in the shape of an “umbo”, was added by pasting it to the body itself – not directly on its base, but 3 mm higher, thus resulting the beaker’s support ring. Today, the item is fissured in four diametrically opposed points, as a result of the recent, inappropriate handlings. Moreover, we must note the numerous striae and scratches, which also occurred recently and which cover almost the entire body of the beaker⁸.

⁸ These undesirable fissures occurred after they were taken into custody by the Museum of Deva, since, in a photograph we obtained through the graciousness of Univ. Prof. Dr. Ioan Andrițoiu, in the museum from Orăștie, the vessel appeared to be in perfect condition. The irregular striae on the beaker suggest that it had been rubbed with a wire brush, probably after it had been discovered, in order to remove the patina that appeared over the centuries.



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Figure 3
nceírmoiáhedrpma // indecmbpeoirslí



The spread of the inscribed ribbon from the “aquila beaker” from Vinerea (drawing by C. I. Popa).

In its middle part, the beaker is ornamented with an incised horizontal ribbon, covering the entire diameter, with thickened edges, its overlapping ends in the shape of handing folds. The ribbon contains an incised text in elegantly scripted lowercase gothic letters. On the opposing sides, the ribbon is interrupted by a realist, incised aquila. The technique by which the aquila and the inscribed ribbon were made is that of incising the item using a small chisel, and then chiselling the contour, where necessary.

The ribbon bearing the gothic script text, the aquila and the lip (outwards and inwards, on a width of approximately 1 cm) are all gilded. The whole item was manufactured with precision and determination, as shown by the elegant contour of the gothic lowercase letters. Dimensions: height = 10 cm; mouth diameter = 9 cm; bottom diameter = 5,7 cm; weight: 150,80 g (fig. 7-8).



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Figure 4



A detail of the inscription on the “aquila beaker” from Vinerea (photo Doru Sabău).

The most important and the most unexpected element of the beaker is represented by the inscription of lowercase gothic letters (**fig. 3-4; 9/2; 10**), whose text could not as of yet been deciphered, in spite of all the efforts made so far.

The text on the beaker from Vinerea was transcribed with the kind help of researcher Ioan Albu⁹, in the following form:

nceirmoiahedrpma  indecmhpeoirsli

III. Interpretation and dating

The inventory ledger of the Museum from Orăștie, beside the description of the item, notes the suspicion that it could be “a Slavic inscription in gothic letters”. Most of the specialists who had seen the inscription, however, supported the hypothesis according to which the inscription had most likely been written in the Romani language¹⁰.

⁹ We wish to thus express our gratitude to Dr. Ioan Albu (Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu) for transcribing the text, as well as for his suggestions regarding the dating that results from the type of writing, from before the Reformation.

¹⁰ The information was provided by historians Ioan Andrițoiu, Olimpia Palamariu and Mihaela Coza. By placing the inscription within the Transylvanian medieval habitation space, we must reproduce the observations on the inscriptions known in this region, their overwhelming majority having been



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Figure 5



The silver Merrianic ring bearing the gothic monogram “M”, from the medieval hoard from Vinerea (photo Doru Sabău).

The strangeness of the inscription and the unsuccessful attempts of deciphering it have most likely postponed the publication of this exceptional item¹¹ and, as such, of the entire hoard, with the exception of the coins¹². This issue can be explained through the answers that the inscription and the beaker itself could have given to certain questions regarding its owner and the nature of the entire hoard¹³.

written in Latin until the 13th century and in German after that. The presence of inscriptions on objects discovered in the rural environment is still, however, connected to the workshops located in the towns. See ALBU, Ioan, „*Forme de scriere în epigrafia transilvăneană în context central-european (sec. XII-XVII)*”. SUCHI (2004): 117-118.

¹¹ POPA, Cristian I., *op. cit.*, p. 527-534.

¹² COZA, Mihaela, „*Tezaurul monetar de la Vinerea (secolele XIII-XVII)*”. *Apulum* XLI (2004): 387-393.

¹³ There is also a very recent attempt of interpreting the text. It was noted by Prof. Coriolan Simedru from Vinerea and it is most likely due to the efforts made by Prof. Ioan Andrițoiu to decipher it, since we personally know of his preoccupations in this sense. Although we consider it to be vagarious, we must hereby reproduce it in its entirety, as follows: “The most important object in this



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Figure 7



The gilded silver “aquila beaker” from the medieval hoard from Vinerea (photo Doru Sabău).

and Magic”, in: *The Role of Magic in the Past. Learned and Popular Magic, Popular Beliefs and Diversity of Attitudes*, *Historia*, I (ed. SZEGHYOVÁ, Blanka), Bratislava, 2005, p. 194-195, fig. 28-29; the formula, however, is absent from the repertoire of Transylvanian inscriptions (FILIMON DOROFTEI, Doina. [Circulația europeană a formulelor campanare în limba latină în secolele XIV-XVIII](#), POSDRU/89/1.5/S/59758 (expert coordinator: prof. dr. NIEDERMAIER, Paul Helmut): 7.

¹⁶ Here is just a random example of a kabbalistic text present on a ring, most likely of Italian provenance, from the 14th century: *APXENTEXNOC CONN OVXEPICAPXMANEP | XMANOCOPNWΦPIOC* (DALTON, O. M. *Catalogue of the Finger Rings, Early Christian, Byzantine, Teutonic, Mediaeval and Later bequeathed by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks, in which are included the other Rings of the Same Periods in the Museum*, Wentworth Press: London, 1912, p. 146, no. 919).



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Its deciphering is thus necessary, an effort that, for us, led to no results. One single group of letters, present in the final part of the text, can be related to the known forms: *LAHE*, which could be rounded to *LAH(W)E* (God)¹⁷.

Figure 8



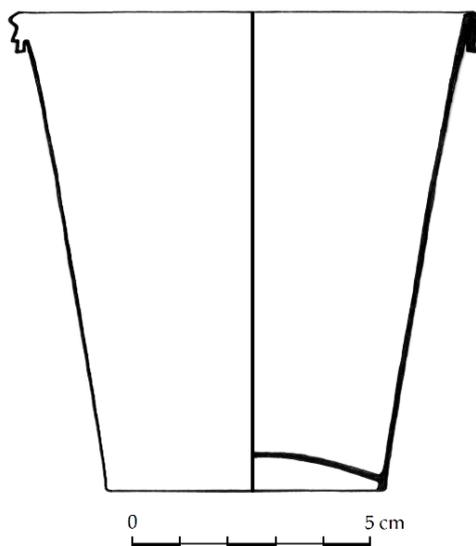
¹⁷ One of the two baptismal fonts of the church from Hosman (Sibiu County) bears the “kabbalistic” inscription: *MAVEJHVE* [M(ARIA) AVE J(A)HVE] (ALBU, Ioan, „Biblie și liturghie...”, p. 132).



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The gilded silver “aquila beaker” from the medieval hoard from Vinerea (photo Doru Sabău).

We believe that we could associate the kabbalistic text on the beaker with the existence of the Virgin Mary monogram rings that bears the monogram “M”, part of the same hoard¹⁸.

The guilloche of the ribbon, made by incised hashing in a gridded form presents antecedents in the metal art of the Arpadian period¹⁹, but it can also be found on the

¹⁸ For the Virgin Mary ring from the hoard, together with the discussion on these rings from the Eastern European space, see POPA, Cristian Ioan, “*Inelul de devoțiune de la Vinerea și problema inelelor marianice medievale*”. *Apulum. Series Archaeologica et Anthropologica* XLIX (2012), as well as LITAUSZKI, Zoltán. *Árpád- és késő középkori pecsétyűrűk a dél-alföldi régióban (Kutatók Bács-Kiskun, Békés és Csongrád megyében)*, Szakdolgozat, kézirat, 2012, *passim*.

¹⁹ See the case of the aquamanile from Boarta (Sibiu County), a western product from the second half of the 13th century, which represents a Sphynx wearing, around its neck, an adornment made in the same manner, through incising - CRÎNGACI-ȚIPLIC, Maria Emilia, „*Elemente de cultură materială a sașilor transilvăneni (sec. XII-XIII). I. Obiecte liturgice*”, in: *Relații interetnice în Transilvania (secolele VI-XIII)* (ed. PINTER, Zeno Karl, ȚIPLIC, Ioan Marian, ȚIPLIC, Maria Emilia), București, 2005, p. 248, pl. IV.



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ribbons bearing gothic inscriptions on the chalices from the 14th-16th centuries²⁰, or on the medallions of an ark from the Bistrița Monastery (Vâlcea) from around the year 1500²¹.

Figure 9



Details of the aquila (1) and the gilded ribbon ends (2) on the beaker from the hoard from Vinerea (photo Doru Sabău).

²⁰ DIVALD, Kornél, „A bártfai Szent Egyed-templon”. *Archaeologiai Értesítő* XXXVI (1916): 149, 163, fig. 1, 11-12; BIELZ, Iulius. *Arta aurarilor sași din Transilvania*. Editura de Stat pentru Literatură și Artă: București, 1957, p. 19, fig. 8; NICOLESCU, Corina. *Die Edelschmiedekunst in Rumänien*. Editura Meridiane: București, 1973, p. 22-23, fig. 17-19, 27-28.

²¹ NICOLESCU, Corina. *Argintăria laică și religioasă în Țările Române (sec. XIV-XIX)*. București, 1968, p. 197, fig. 121 (an apparently Transylvanian product).



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The bird engraved on the body of the beaker, separating the ribbon in two, can probably be assimilated to an aquila (**fig. 9/1**). The following morphological details support this identification: the massive body, with strong legs and hooked talons, characteristic to birds of prey, the strong beak, straight at the base and hooked at the tip, the coat, the large, pointed wings. The only detail that differs from the image of an aquila is the absence of a coat on the legs, down to the talons, as is the case of ravens, and the eyes, which are more similar to those of the raven. The bird on the beaker from Vinerea is depicted in a static position, its wings closed and its talons clutched.

Figure 10



The spread of the ribbon with the inscription from the hoard from Vinerea.

The coat on its body was made in the shape of lozenges and triangles²², while the one of the wings (raised at the tips) and the tail closely imitates the natural coat. The coat on the tail is closer to that of a pigeon, rather than that of a bird of prey²³. The head is outlined in firm lines and it includes all of the possible details, including the nasal fossa on the elegantly arched beak. In an overview, we are faced with a representation that does not accurately reproduce the body of a certain bird, but is rather a mix

²² A similar means of depicting the coat similar is also present in the case of the eagle on the gunners' girdle from Mediaş, from 1564 (BIELZ, Iulius, *op. cit.*, p. 22-23, fig. 19).

²³ For clarifications regarding the similarity with a certain species, we must thank professor Florin Toncean from Sebeş.



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between an aquila, a raven and a pigeon. Since, in the representation, the features of the aquila are predominant, we prefer to identify it as such²⁴.

The medieval silverware borrowed the symbol of the aquila, particularly in the case of liturgical items. On certain silver standing crosses, bearing the symbols of the Evangelists, made in Upper Hungary or in Central Europe (generally dated to the 15th century), the aquilas or the eagles, always depicted on the upper arms, reference the apocalyptic symbol of John the Evangelist, which, in iconography, are placed together with those of the Evangelists Luke (the bull) Mark (the lion) and Matthew (the angel)²⁵. The birds are engraved in the same position, towards the left, but with open wings, in a more stylised manner, in all cases their talons holding a textless ribbon and auras around their heads.

The eagle could be considered as a Christian symbol, in relation with Saint John's iconography. In this sense, the examples are the cross of the Nyári family²⁶, one item from the National Museum²⁷, as well as two crosses from the vicinity of Poprád²⁸. We could also consider the example of a Transylvanian item from Cisnădie (approx. 1440)²⁹. An expressivity that is more similar to that of the bird on the beaker from Vinerea is represented by an aquila depicted in relief, also holding a ribbon, present on the upper arm of a gothic style cross of the same type from Hungary³⁰. The similarities in the means of execution in the case of the coat of the tail, the wings and

²⁴ The shift from the raven to the aquila is known, for instance in the Medieval Age, in the case of the items contained by the Heraldic shield of the Hunyadi family, originating from the same south-western Transylvanian space; see TIRON, Tudor-Radu. „*Din nou despre corbul cu inel în cioc. Reprezentări ale stemelor Hunedoreștilor într-un manuscris din colecția Bibliotecii de Stat Bavareze*”. Sargetia, s.n. VII (2016).

²⁵ KOLBA, Judit H. „*Véssett gótikus talpas keresztjeink*”. *Folia Archaeologica* XXXI (1980): 262.

²⁶ KOLBA, Judit H., *op. cit.* p. 240, 262, fig. 1-2.

²⁷ KOLBA, Judit H., *op. cit.* p. 246, fig. 10.

²⁸ KOLBA, Judit H., *op. cit.*, p. 246, 250, fig. 12-13.

²⁹ BIELZ, Iulius, *op. cit.*, p. 19-20, pl. I/a; DÂMBOIU, Daniela. „*Modele, replici și prototipuri în arta medievală transilvăneană*”. *Ars Transsilvaniae* XIV-XV (2004-2005): fig. 7.

³⁰ KOLBA, Judit H., *op. cit.*, p. 254, fig. 15.



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the legs can be found in the representation of the eagle a disk from the Tismana Monastery (16th century)³¹.

The individual representations of eagles or other birds have an antecedent in the Byzantine enamelled pottery from the Lower Danube, from the 13th-14th centuries³². However, in the medieval totemics, the occurrence of zoomorphic motifs (which include those of birds) is seen as an attribute of the Renaissance³³, although we must also mention a representation imprinted with a scroll on the medieval ceramics (probably from the 14th-15th centuries) from *Zalău-Piața Agroalimentară*³⁴. From the Renaissance period, we also know of glass beakers that are somewhat similar in shape, ornamented in the middle part with images from the bestiary of their time, flanked in the upper part by texts³⁵.

The gilding of the rim of the beaker represented a usual practice applied to the silver tableware of the elites from the Medieval and Premodern era, although it would appear that not even the figures from the top of the social hierarchy could always have access to such items³⁶.

³¹ NICOLESCU, Corina. *Argintăria...*, p. 136, fig. 87b, representing the Wallachian coat of arms. This item, which was subsequently applied, could be a Transylvanian product.

³² NICOLESCU, Corina. *Die Edelschmiedekunst...*, p. 95, fig. 22 (in the upper and middle parts); 23/b (Zimnicea).

³³ PETRIȘOR, Carmen. „*Colecția de argintărie a Bibliotecii Batthyaneum din Alba Iulia (Catalog)*”. *Apulum* XIX (1981): 466. A late gothic chalice, mixed with the Renaissance style (from 1530), decorated on the foot with birds, belonged to the Roman-Catholic Church of Corund (Harghita County), followed by the church of the same rite from Poian (Covasna County) (PETRIȘOR, Carmen, *op. cit.*, p. 466, 471, pl. II/3).

³⁴ CULIC, Dan. „*Ceramica medievală decorată cu ruloul descoperită în județul Sălaj*”. In: RĂDULESCU, Gabriela (ed.). *Vasaria Medievalia II*, Bistrița – Cluj-Napoca (2010), p. 71, pl. 3/2.

³⁵ VERES, László. *Üvegművességünk a XVI-XIX. században*. Miskolc, 2006, p. 21 (drawing).

³⁶ We must hereby reproduce an episode noted in Mihai Cserei's chronicle, in which the protagonists are Prince of Transylvania Apafi II, his wife, and the wife of silversmith Bojtos (settled in the princely court of Alba Iulia), the latter visiting the former two. The prince asked: “Mistress Bojtosoia, what does your man do?”, to which the woman answered: “Well, Your Highness, my man gilds the chimes of the silver bowls”. Upon hearing that the vessels were meant for Count Teleki, his known rival at that time, the prince exclaimed in irritation: “Do you hear that, wife? Do you hear



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As opposed to the liturgical silverware, which is much more well-known and has been studied at-length, the profane silverware, which developed beginning with the second half of the 15th century, still belongs to a field that has been insufficiently explored³⁷. The beaker from Vinerea belongs to a typological version that circulated in Transylvania and Europe in the Medieval and Premodern era. Two silver tronconic beakers, with firmly demarcated and gilded upper rims, are part of the collections held by the Batthyaneum Library from Alba Iulia.

One of them was made in a workshop in Augsburg and it was dated to the second half of the 17th century³⁸, while the second, a Transylvanian product, was dated to the second half of the 17th century – the beginning of the 18th century³⁹. Both items lack any decorative motifs. Similar items from the 17th-18th centuries can also be found south of the Carpathians⁴⁰. The Transylvanian craftsmen, through their production of beakers, also influence the silverware of Wallachia and Moldavia, where somewhat similar beakers can be found (but with funnel-shaped mouths), originating from the second half of the 16th century, which also reproduce the text-inscribed ribbons, written using Cyrillic⁴¹ or Greek⁴² letters.

what your uncle is doing? I am the prince of Transylvania and still I do not have gilded bowls (dishes)" - BARIȚIU, George. „*Din cronic'a lui Michailu Cserei. 1661-1711*”. *Transilvania* 7 (1869): 74. Apafi, at that time, was indeed in a severe financial state, attenuated only by pawning two crates of silverware in order to pay his debts (BIELZ, Iulius, *op. cit.*, p. 16).

³⁷ BIELZ, Iulius, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

³⁸ PETRIȘOR, Carmen-Maria. „*Colecția de argintărie a Bibliotecii «Batthyaneum» din Alba Iulia (II) (Catalog)*”. *Apulum* XXII (1985): 137, 142, pl. IV/1.

³⁹ PETRIȘOR, Carmen. „*Colecția...*”, p. 467, 475, pl. III/4.

⁴⁰ NICOLESCU, Corina. *Argintăria...*, p. 78, 80, fig. 34, 38.

⁴¹ As is the case of the beakers located at the monasteries of Mărgineni (NICOLESCU, Corina. *Argintăria...*, p. 68, fig. 13, the ends of the ribbon are crossed) and Tismana (NICOLESCU, Corina. *Argintăria...*, p. 68, fig. 14; NICOLESCU, Corina. *Die Edelschmiedekunst...*, fig. 11), monastic centres that often commissioned the Saxon craftsmen. In Moldavia, we must mention the beaker gifted to Bosnea by his father, logothete Luca Stroici, in 1591 (CÂNDEA, Virgil. *Mărturii românești peste hotare. II. India-Olanda. Supliment Albania-Grecia*. Editura Enciclopedică: București, 1998, fig. 18). On chalices, see the ones from the Bistrița Monastery (16th century) (NICOLESCU, Corina. *Argintăria...*, p. 114, fig. 67) and Mount Athos, originating from Moldavia or Transylvania (CÂNDEA, Virgil, *op. cit.*, fig. 19-20).



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Similarly shaped beakers also appeared in the gothic iconography, always as metal items used by the elites, or as goods of outstanding value. Thus, they are present in the miniatures of the book *Grandes Chroniques de France* (1380)⁴³ (**fig. 11/3**), in Jacques Daret's painting *Adoration of the Magi* (1435)⁴⁴ (**fig. 11/5**), or in the painting on the triptych *The Resurrection of Lazarus*, by Nicolas Froment, in the maundy scene (1461)⁴⁵ (**fig. 11/4**). În Transilvania, astfel de pahare sunt reprezentate în pictura altarelor de la Mediaș (ca. 1485) și Dupuș (16 century)⁴⁶. Moreover, the shape of the vessel was also transposed in porcelain, as is the case of a majolica item from Buda, dated between 1480-1490⁴⁷.

The best stylistic analogy for the beaker from Vinerea came from Transylvania, from Râșnov (Brașov County), where it was discovered in the beginning of the 20th century, upon the erection of a rectory – a silver liturgical beaker dated to the 14th century, with a similar shape and rim profiling, and, in the middle part, an incised ribbon bearing the Virgin Mary gothic inscription AVE + A + HILF + GOT + ML + HILF + GOT + MARIA + (**fig. 11/1**)⁴⁸.

⁴² NICOLESCU, Corina. *Argintăria...*, p. 80, fig. 38.

⁴³ KLUCKERT, Ehrenfried. „Malerei der Gotik. Tafel-, Wand- und Buchmalerei”. In: TOMAN, Rolf, BEDNORZ, Achim (Hrsg.), *Die Kunst der Gotik. Architektur. Skulptur. Malerei*. Könemann, 2004, p. 393 (photo, upper part). There are two gold tronconic beakers on the royal table.

⁴⁴ KLUCKERT, Ehrenfried, *op. cit.*, p. 413 (photo, lower part). In this scene, one of the magi is holding, in his left hand, a gold beaker bearing a ribbon that encircles the middle part, covered with an ornamented lid.

⁴⁵ KLUCKERT, Ehrenfried, *op. cit.*, p. 440, 401 (photo, upper part). This scene, in which Mary washes the feet of Jesus, also contains an ornamented, probably silver beaker with an embossed gilded upper rim and an encircling middle ribbon, which is very similar to the beaker from Vinerea.

⁴⁶ RUSU, Adrian Andrei. *Castelul și spada. Cultura materială a elitelor din Transilvania în Evul Mediu târziu*. Mega Publishing House: Cluj-Napoca, 2019, fig. 76/a-b.

⁴⁷ CSUKOVITS, Enikő. „Sótartók, kupák, kanalak: A késő középkori Magyarországi kincsei”. *História* 30, 10 (2008): 40 (photo upper left par).

⁴⁸ GYÁRFÁS, Tihamér. „A brassai ötvösséművekről”. *Archaeologiai Értesítő* XXXI (1911): 364, fig. 3.



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Figure 11



The silver beaker from Râșnov (14th century?) (1), the majolica vessel from Buda (approx. 1480-1490) (2), the rims of the beakers from Vinerea (approx. 1500) (6) and of the Burgundian “Beaker with Apes” (approx. 1425-1450) (7); western gothic iconography with representations of precious metal beakers (14th-15th centuries): *Grandes Chroniques de France* (1380) (3), Nicolas Froment, *The Resurrection of Lazarus* (1461) (4), Jacques Daret, *Adoration of the Magi* (1435) (5) (after GYÁRFÁS 1911 – 1; CSUKOVITS 2008 – 2; KLUCHERT 2004 – 3-5).



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The gilded silver beaker from Vinerea cannot be dated accurately. The simplicity of the beakers, as compared to the stemmed chalices, which combine much more numerous elements of chronological value, greatly reduces the possibility of a precise dating⁴⁹. The profiled rim of the beaker (**fig. 11/4**) is highly similar to that of the aforementioned beaker from Râșnov (**fig. 11/1**), as well as to that of a Transylvanian gilded silver beaker from the 16th century, although the latter is much more complex⁵⁰. However, it is very similar to the rim of the famous Burgundian item known as the “Beaker with Apes”, dated between 1425-1450⁵¹ (**fig. 11/7**).

The earliest occurrence of a ribbon bearing an inscription in lowercase gothic letters is on a chalice from Săcădate, made in an early gothic style, dated to the beginning of the 14th century, which is said to be the connection between the newer chalices and the Transylvanian Romanic ones that used uppercase letters for the texts of the ribbons⁵². Therefore, the beaker from Vinerea cannot be older than the aforementioned chronological stretch and it seems to reflect the use of a mature style of lowercase gothic letters.

Another possible benchmark could be given by the absence of the workshop mark on the item under scrutiny. Considering the law from 1504, regarding the compulsory nature of marking the silverware in Transylvania, we could propose that it dates to a

⁴⁹ For instance, there are no analogies with the items from Transylvania published by Victor Roth (ROTH, Victor. *Kunstdenkmäler aus den Sächsischen Kirchen Siebenbürgens, I*. Hermannstadt, 1922).

⁵⁰ BIELZ, Iulius, *op. cit.*, fig. 13.

⁵¹ YOUNG, Bonnie. “The Monkeys & the Peddler”. *MMAB* 26, 10 (1968): 441, 443, fig. 1-2, 8.

⁵² BIELZ, Iulius, *op. cit.*, p. 19, fig. 8, with the inscription of gratitude *hilf got maria hilf, hilf got*, thus in a liturgical ambiance (see also NICOLESCU, Corina. *Die Edelschmiedekunst...*, fig. 19). However, Ioan Albu considers that the first use of the gothic lowercase script in Transylvania is attested on the night bell of the parish church of Sibiu, dated to 1411 (ALBU, Ioan, „*Forme de scriere...*”, p. 122, fig. 15). For precious metal chalices and beakers with bands or ribbons bearing inscriptions of gothic script, see NICOLESCU, Corina. *Die Edelschmiedekunst...*, fig. 17-19, 27-28, and for other types of metal medieval wares bearing inscribed bands, see ROTH, Victor, *op. cit.*, Abb. 5-6, 17, 19-20, 30; PARÁDI, Nándor. „*Későközépkori feliratos díszű cserépedények*”. *Folia Archaeologica* XVII (1965): 155-167.



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period prior to this year; however, the hypothesis is not truly solid, since the law was not always obeyed⁵³.

The transfer of the gothic lowercase writing from *vasa sacra* to *vasa non sacra* occurred to its full extent during the 15th century⁵⁴. Inscriptions on horizontal ribbons also appeared on the baptismal font of the Lutheran Cathedral of Saint Mary in Sibiu, made by craftsman Leonhardus in 1438⁵⁵. The ribbons that contain inscriptions of gothic lowercase letters are also present in other artistic works, such as the consoles containing angels that hold Merrianic inscriptions, carved in stone at the Lutheran Cathedral of Saint Mary in Sibiu (1431)⁵⁶, one of the chapters of the Knight's Hall of the Hunedoara Castle (1452)⁵⁷, or the ones that flank Ioan Geréb's crest from the church of Vingard (1462)⁵⁸.

The representation of the aquila that breaks the text on the ribbon can be interpreted, in this context, as an early Renaissance benchmark that can place the manufacturing of the beaker from Vinerea in the late gothic age, in which the Renaissance merely began to make its presence known. Thus, the beaker can be dated to sometime during the 15th century, perhaps towards its end, partially contemporary with the period in which the liturgical gilded silver chalices represented the primary products of the Transylvanian silversmithing⁵⁹.

Thus, there is a plethora of possible dating, depending on the type of gothic script, the manner in which the inscription had been made and the shape of the beaker. Unfortunately, the rest of the items that compile the hoard do not aid in our

⁵³ PETRIȘOR, Carmen. „Colecția...”, p. 464.

⁵⁴ ALBU, Ioan, „Forme de scriere...”, p. 124.

⁵⁵ ALBU, Ioan, „Forme de scriere...”, p. 123, fig. 3; ALBU, Ioan. „Die Engelsprüche am Westportal der Marienkirche in Hermannstadt”. In: ȚIPLIC, Ioan Marian, GÜNDISCH, Konrad (ed.). *Sașii și concetățenii lor ardeleni/Die Saschen und ihre Nachbarn in Siebenbürgen. Studia In Honorem Dr. Thomas Nägler*. Editura Altip: Alba Iulia, 2009, p. 111, fig. 14.

⁵⁶ ALBU, Ioan, „Forme de scriere...”, p. 123, fig. 11; ALBU, Ioan. „Die Engelsprüche ...”, p. 96, fig. 2-5.

⁵⁷ ALBU, Ioan. „Die Engelsprüche ...”, p. 96, fig. 7-8.

⁵⁸ ALBU, Ioan. „Die Engelsprüche ...”, p. 96, fig. 9.

⁵⁹ PETRIȘOR, Carmen. „Colecția...”, p. 465.



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understanding of the beaker's dating, since the coins are dated between the 13th and 17th centuries⁶⁰.

We believe that the ring bearing the monogram M (**fig. 5**) must be placed in relation with the beaker. At least from the viewpoint of the manufacturing technique, in gothic script on a background made in incised hashes, the ring disk can be compared with the field of the ribbon on the silver beaker. Thus, we propose a similar dating for the seal ring⁶¹.

Regarding the aforementioned possible affiliation of the beaker to the gipsy environment, invoked from the viewpoint of the inscription, several aspects must be mentioned. In Transylvania, could have settled at the end of the 14th century⁶². In 1423, the Hungarian King Sigismund of Luxembourg issued a diploma which facilitated the safe passage of Ladislau, the voivode of the gypsies (*Ladislaus Woyvoda Tiganorum*), and his people through the Transylvanian boroughs and towns⁶³.

There is no information regarding the gypsies from the Cugir Valley during the Middle Ages. They are, however, mentioned in the vicinity, in Sebeș. They appeared once again in Orăștie in 1509, accused of act of violence throughout the borough and, as such, they were arrested⁶⁴. In the beginning of the 16th century, the ruler of Wallachia, Neagoie Basarab, commissions, from craftsman Celestin from Sibiu, a silver censer which was crafted in complete disaccord with the ruler's requests, who

⁶⁰ See COZA, Mihaela, *op. cit.*; POPA, Cristian Ioan. *Valea Cugirului...*, p. 546-552.

⁶¹ POPA, Cristian Ioan, "Inelul de devoțiune..."

⁶² CHELCEA, Ion. *Țiganii din România. Monografie etnografică*. Editura Institutului Central de Statistică: București, 1944, p. 14. Regarding the toponym *Cyganuaia*, attested in 1370 as a village, there are certain doubts, with respect to the correct reading of the original text; see HASAN, Mihai Florin. „Informații despre prezența țiganilor în voievodatul Transilvaniei și comitatele vecine în secolele XIV-XV”. *Revista Bistriței* XXIII (2009): 113.

⁶³ HASAN, Mihai Florin, *op. cit.*, p. 111, 113.

⁶⁴ DÖRNER, Anton Egon. *Documente și cronici privind istoria orașului și Scaunului Orăștie. Vol. I: 1200-1541*. Editura Argonaut: Cluj-Napoca, 2003, p. 143, nr. 318.



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unreservedly labelled it as “gypsy-like” (*ad modum Ciganorum*)⁶⁵. The outcome is self-evident: the liturgical object is remade, but, in this case, we are more interested in the pejorative meaning received by a silver item made by the gypsies or in a “gypsy-like” fashion, at that time. This is one of the reasons for which we doubt – if there ever truly were any reason to believe it so – its manufacturing in a gypsy workshop.

The discussion, however, can also take place on another level, more so as a possible working hypothesis: the beaker and the hoard belonged to a *bulibaşă* (a gypsy clan leader). One argument in this sense is that each time we attempted to find anything out about the inscription, we invariably received the response: “it would appear to be gypsy in nature and the beaker belonged to a *bulibaşă*”⁶⁶.

It is true that one of the basic components of the gypsy fortune was, at that time, the silver beaker. Ion Chelcea noted, in the 1930s-1940s, that, in the case of the gypsies from “Țara Oltului” (The Olt Land), their fortunes were compiled of precious metal vessels; when such items were absent, they sought them at great distances. The Romanian ethnographer’s extremely suggestive observations are as follows:

Their fortune resides in the so-called gilded silver “beakers” – which they then pass down from father to son, much like real-estate [...] I sought to convince myself of what I had heard, even before beginning the research, and I found out that the `tent dwellers` Gypsies do indeed have *beakers*; silver cups that they keep as wealth, stashed away carefully in their knapsacks. Not owning beakers was, to them, the equivalent of being poor.

“What are «beakers»? They are medieval antiquities: valuable silver and gold vessels, with limited circulation, reduced to their circles and to those of the silversmiths who own such antiquities. The eligible maidens, amongst themselves, endow themselves

⁶⁵ VOINESCU, Theodora. „*Din legăturile artistice ale Țării Românești cu Transilvania (meșteri argintari)*”. SCIA 1-2 (1956): 79 and note 4.

⁶⁶ This possibility was suggested to us each time by Univ. Prof. Dr. Ioan Andrițoiu who, in his turn, among his Cluj-based colleagues, attempted to decipher the mystery of the inscription.



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not with land, rarely with money, but with such valuable items. Names of kings, landgraves and years like «1600» can be read on them⁶⁷.

Many of the “gypsy” beakers known today (which, unfortunately, have not been systematically studied) are Transylvanian artistic products, most of which from the 18th-19th centuries, directly commissioned by the gypsy clan leaders, and their value was greater than that of the homes they later endowed⁶⁸.

The assumption that the hoard belonged to a “bulibaşă”, as suggested by the attempts of deciphering the inscription on the gilded silver beaker, should not be overlooked, but it is difficult to outline a history around this hypothesis. The information known about the medieval, premodern or modern gypsy “elite” is limited. The qualities by which the “leadership” of the gypsy community was earned were bravery, as well as wealth⁶⁹.

⁶⁷ When Ion Chelcea carried out his field surveys in 1939, a great “beaker crisis” was noted. In order not to lose the existing ones, the beakers were pawned in different places in exchange for money: they were pawned at certain villagers, priests, teachers, banks etc. The money thus procured was reinvested in horse trading. The older silver beakers were more valuable than the ones made of newer silver. This way, both the beaker and the silver coins often pawned together were kept in a safe place, and the “fortune” was perpetuated. As a transferable good, it only circulated within the dowery; generally, the boys received “beakers” at the wedding, while the girls only received them rarely, in the case of families that had no boys. The value of a “beaker”, for the owner, was almost priceless. When Ion Chelcea asked to buy such a “beaker”, the gypsy’s response was definitive: “I’m not selling my fortune, not for 200.000 Lei, not for 500.000 Lei” (CHELCEA, Ion, *op. cit.*, p. 136-137, 197). The beakers were not shown to just anyone and they were taken out only for certain holidays (BIELZ, Iulius, *op. cit.*, p. 31). There are many tales connected to the priceless beakers; one of these tales was also noted by Ion Chelcea (*A story about a stolen beaker*) (CHELCEA, Ion, *op. cit.*, p. 137, 229-230). Another famous tale is that of a chalice that belonged to Michael the Brave, which later came into the possession of a Wallachian Boyar family who had taken refuge in Transylvania in 1866. From there, the chalice was gifted to a gypsy *bulibaşă* and, after it had been pawned in Turda, it was auctioned off in 1907 and it was bought by the famous amateur archaeologist István Téglás (BIELZ, Iulius, *op. cit.*, p. 12-13).

⁶⁸ BIELZ, Iulius, *op. cit.*, p. 30-31, fig. 29 (with the image of the *bulibaşă* standing in front of the tent entrance).

⁶⁹ The titles they had given themselves, in the 1940s (some of which are still in use), in the Romanian areas, were “bulucbaşe”, “voevod” [voivode], “vătaf” [bailiff]. In other areas, their titles were “duci”



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With respect to the prestige they imply, the beakers still represent, for the Roma communities, an immense fortune, which often becomes the subject of disputes⁷⁰ or even disownments for life⁷¹.

[dukes] and “comiți” [counts]. However, above all, the greatest authority was that of the “bulucbaș”, about which Chelcea wondered whether he descended, in time, from the gypsies, or whether the representatives of power hid this title. A *bulibașă* had authority over his subjects and was also exempted from taxes or from different labours. They all considered themselves above the law and they lived by their own rules (CHELCEA, Ion, *op. cit.*, p. 171-172, 175). Naturally, these titles also include the ones used in Romania today, namely that of “king”, as well as the supreme title of “emperor” (!).

⁷⁰ Among the gypsies, during the last few decades, the beakers were subjects of quarrel and trials. For instance, one such situation was noted by Gabriel Sala: “My father inherited a very valuable beaker from my grandfather. He was the eldest son and, in the case of succession in the gypsy community, he is thus favoured. My father’s youngest brother received two, less valuable beakers. He was displeased and he called forth the gypsy court of law. There, all he did was lie and, for the settlement, my father was obligated to pay 40.000 Lei in reparations, as per the judges’ decision. He regretted it afterwards, but there was nothing more he could have done. In any case, he sold his beaker for 1.700.000 Lei”. In another case that took place before 1989, the cause was once again a valuable beaker: “My sister was taken because my father, after he bought a beaker, had to pay the middle man 50.000, during the communist years. All because that was what the elders decided upon trial. My father did not want to pay, so they took his daughter. My father then immediately borrowed the money, gathered a few relative and went to get my sister back”; cf. SALA, Gabriel. „Percepția și desfășurarea judecării țigănești la neamul romilor gabori”. *Analele Banatului XV* (2007): 302. Today, the prices of such beakers range, by approximation (and exaggeration, surely), between 100.000 and a million Euros (!) – ROGOJINARU, Paul. „Țiganiii cortorari reprezintă singura comunitate de rromi a cărei avere este înmagazinată într-un pabar vechi din argint”. *Mediaș Info* (online), 31 octombrie 2010; ROGOJINARU, Paul. „Pocalul țiganului aristocrat”. *Adevărul*, 30 octombrie 2010 (online).

⁷¹ During an interview recently conducted in the Arpașu de Jos Commune (Sibiu County) with the owner of a “noble beaker” (bearing the inscription COMES.GABRIEL DE PEREN.[1]665), the following important observations were recorded: “From among the gypsies, the one who sells his beaker is shunned and excluded from the community until the end of his days. More so, two-three generations after him are subjected to the same treatment, regardless of whether or not he or his children later buy another beaker. The gypsies do not grant any extenuating circumstances neither to the one who sells because of his great hardships nor to the one who sells because of his madness” (ROGOJINARU, Paul. „Țiganiii ...”; ROGOJINARU, Paul. „Pocalul...”).



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Conclusions

The gilded silver beakers and chalices are items that are often encountered in the 14th-16th centuries in Transylvania, some of which are exceptional items made by the local jewellers⁷². Most of the ones kept in the collections of the Catholic churches bear inscriptions in Latin or German and they invoke the aid of Jesus Christ or of the Virgin Mary. This is the case of the chalices from Șeica Mare, Aldorf or Cepar. Other times, the chalice is inscribed with the name of the craftsman, as is the one from Petrești (Bistrița-Năsăud County)⁷³.

However, in Vinerea, there are no elements of Christian iconography – they are secular, with the exception of the ones we invoked for the sake of the parallels with the symbols of Sain John the Evangelist, from the standing crosses. We could also be faced with a *chrismatory*, but it could also be a *vidrecome* with secular usage⁷⁴.

The tradition of the family from the Vinerea village, in whose yard the hoard had been found, is also quite interesting – according to them, somewhere in the perimeter of the house, there is an old treasure that belonged to the ancestors. The discovery of this mysterious and rich hoard confirmed the local tradition⁷⁵. Who was this owner, who, beside the copper, silver and gold coins (some of which with a very rare circulation in Transylvania), also accumulated other silver and gold items and also owned a gilded silver chalice-beaker? Was he a local nobleman, a judge, a merchant or a craftsman?

⁷² For the outstanding fame of the Transylvanian silversmiths and goldsmiths, see BIELZ, Iulius, *op. cit.*, p. 12-16.

⁷³ PASCU, Ștefan. *Meșteșugurile din Transilvania până în secolul al XVI-lea*. Editura Academiei: București, 1954, p. 72-73, fig. 8.

⁷⁴ *Vidrecome* – a beaker generally made of glass, in a cylindrical shape, often depicting coats of arms or crests, used for drinking during festive meetings, passed from one person to another around the table. It symbolized the joy of a reunion; cf. *Dicționar de artă. Forme, tehnici, structuri artistice. N-Z* (coord. Mircea Popescu). Editura Meridiane: București, 1998, p. 200.

⁷⁵ The house where the hoard had been discovered, as well as the neighbouring houses belonged, in the past (surely beginning with the 19th century) to the Mihi family, a branch of the Vinerea-based Mihești family, of which the well-known politician and businessman Ioan Mihi was part.



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Naturally, what would aid greatly in this case would be the deciphering of the text on the ribbon of the beaker. From our establishments, it is most likely not a liturgical text, nor is it a votive one, but it is probably related to an incantation or a talismanic formula.

For now, the “Aquila Beaker” remains an enigma, in regards to its use. The message was clearly accessible only to the initiate, the owner; however, it represents a wonderful testimony to the art of the Transylvanian silver and gold from around the year 1500.

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