

**A cusped drinking bowl with fantastical beasts in roundels**  
**Serbian Empire**  
**c. 1350-1400**



*20.5 x 12.9 x 3.5 cm; hammered, chased and gilded silver with repoussé decoration and tooling. Some slight splitting to the rim in three places, extended no more than 10mm through the metal in the largest instance. Some rubbing and losses to the gilding on the most exposed areas of decoration, otherwise almost pristinely preserved.*

*Provenance*

With How of Edinburgh, 27 Sloane Street, London, by 1949

*Published*

G. E. P. How, *Notes on Antique Silver 1948-49*, Glasgow, February 1949, pp. 12 and 15.

This shallow silver dish takes the form of a flattened ovoid, with twelve roughly equal cusps or lobes slung rhythmically around its low rim. Nearly every part of the vessel's interior is enlivened with precise and intricate repoussé work, a technique in which thin metal sheet is hammered repeatedly from one side with fine punches and stamps, in order to create a raised and textured surface on its opposite face. It is decorated in this manner with a complex design of roundels and foliate motifs arranged around a raised central boss. In each of the six main roundels, all of which have hexafoil framing elements, lions, eagles, griffins and other fantastical figures

appear in postures akin to heraldic beasts. They are separated from one another in four places by swirling vine tendrils sprouting large, oak-like leaves. At the centre of the bowl's well is a long, raised section framing a plain oval, the major vertices of which sprout further clusters of oak leaves and short curling shoots. Almost all of the vessel's elaborate repoussé work was executed from the underside upwards, in to the interior of its well, with selective areas punched back down again from the inside to sharpen the design; the leaves which sprout and unfurl in the interstitial spaces between the figurative roundels were hammered upwards from beneath in the first instance, before being carefully pushed back down at their tips with a ball-point punch. Small circular punches in two sizes were then used to texturise and decorate the 'background' spaces of the design.



When this almost pristinely preserved drinking bowl appeared on the art market in the middle of the twentieth century, Charles Oman was the first scholar to correctly identify it as the work of a Medieval goldsmith, suggesting a Hungarian origin.<sup>1</sup> Although it has remained largely unpublished since, more recent scholarship has unearthed a tiny corpus of closely related vessels now thought to have been made not in Hungary but instead by a community of highly skilled goldsmiths active at the height of the Serbian Empire during the second half of the fourteenth century and into the early 1400s.<sup>2</sup> Serbia was an expanding state during the later Middle Ages, its boundaries extending right up to the Aegean Sea thanks especially to the military campaigns of King Milutin (1282-1321) and his grandson Czar Dušan (1331-1355). By the first decades of the fifteenth century Serbia controlled the largest silver mining centres in the Balkans.<sup>3</sup> Expansion came with a sting in its tail however, since many of these mines fell into the hands of Dušan's

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<sup>1</sup> G. E. P. How, *Notes on Antique Silver 1948-49*, Glasgow, February 1949, p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> Bojana Radojković, *Masterpieces of Serbian Goldsmiths' Work: 13<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> Century*, Exh. Cat., London, Victoria and Albert Museum, 1 July – 2 August 1981; Mila Gajić, *Silver Bowls from the Late Middle Ages in Serbia*, Exh. Cat., Belgrade, Museum of Applied Art, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Gajić 2010, p. 18.

feudal lords who leased them out to the wealthy mercantile entrepreneurs of Dubrovnik.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, goldsmiths flocked to the region's urban commercial centres from as far afield as Germany and Italy to fill the increasing demand for exquisite secular and liturgical plate, bringing with them a complex and layered mix of stylistic influences.<sup>5</sup> They produced precious metalwork not only for local courts, at which vessels like ours were regularly given as diplomatic gifts and symbols of allegiance, but also for export further afield; a number of stylistically and technically analogous vessels and other plate have been discovered in sites across present-day Bulgaria, Romania, Macedonia and the Ukraine as well as in Serbia itself, while over 300 records of silver bowls have been found in local inventories and documents surviving from the fourteenth century alone.<sup>6</sup> Even so, and as with precious metalwork from elsewhere in Europe, almost nothing has survived since, as soon as they were made, luxury objects in silver provided an instantly convertible reserve of wealth, 'the value of which lay in the metal rather than the workmanship'.<sup>7</sup>



As a result of their inherent material value, it is almost exclusively those vessels preserved in monastic treasuries or through burial that have come down to us. Of those which are known to scholars today, our vessel relates particularly closely to a small group of lobed drinking bowls which are thought to have been made in the region between Dubrovnik and the Adriatic coast.<sup>8</sup> One of these, excavated at Stobi in Macedonia, was discovered with a small cache of coins minted

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<sup>4</sup> Radojković 1981, pp. 6-7.

<sup>5</sup> Gajić 2010, pp. 20-21.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>7</sup> Philippa Glanville ed., *Silver*, London, V&A pub., 1996, p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> For a breakdown of current scholarship on the subject of localization and attribution, see Gajić 2010, pp. 39-41.

during the reign of King Vukašin (1366-1371), which has been used as evidence for dating the group as a whole (fig. 1).<sup>9</sup> It seems almost beyond doubt that our vessel was created in the same workshop as the Stobi find (they are of similar size, shape and decoration, and both have twelve lobes), and like that example it is highly likely that the plain, ungilded oval motif at its centre was originally covered by an attachment, most probably a silver disc with engraved or enamelled decoration.<sup>10</sup> Though far plainer than our vessel, other silver drinking bowls found at Kosovo and Nikopol also replicate its lobed, ovoid shape and its combination of foliate and bestial motifs. These uniting characteristics betray the complex, international influences of the goldsmiths who crafted them, with one foot firmly planted in the long image-making tradition of the Byzantine world<sup>11</sup> (fig. 2).

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<sup>9</sup> Gajić 2010, p. 39.

<sup>10</sup> See also Gajić 2010, no. 5, pp. 88-9, and no. 9, pp. 96-7. It remains possible that our bowl remained unfinished despite its otherwise well-advanced state of execution, since there are no apparent traces of such a disc ever having been fixed in place. Another interpretation could be that it was intended for export, and that the space was left empty for filling by a goldsmith in another centre.

<sup>11</sup> *Nobiles Officinae: Die Königlichen Hofwerkstätten zu Palermo zure Zeit der Normannen und Staufer im 12. und 13. Jahrhundert*, Exh. Cat., Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, 31 March – 13 June 2004, cat. 45, pp. 213-4; see also Clifton Olds ed., *The meeting of Two Worlds: The Crusades and the Mediterranean Context*, Exh. Cat., University of Michigan Museum of Art, 9 May – 27 September 1981.



Fig. 1  
Drinking bowl  
Serbia (found at Stobi, Macedonia)  
c. 1350-1400  
*18.5 cm (length) x 2.8 cm (height); silver and silver-gilt*  
Belgrade, National Museum, inv. 343



Fig. 2  
Plaque with griffons  
Southern Italy  
12<sup>th</sup> century  
*7.9 x 17.5 cm; elephant ivory*  
Florence, Museo Nazionale del Bargello, inv. 83 C