

Title: Covered Cup from the Chungul Kurgan

Date: End of the 12th – early 13th century

Geography: Azov steppe, found near Tokmak, Zaporiz'ka oblast', Ukraine

Culture: Crusader, Qipčaq (Cuman)

Medium: Gilded silver

Dimensions: 29.5 x 16.5 cm

Current Institution: Treasury of the National Museum of History of Ukraine, Kyiv

Inventory Number: Inv. Nr. A3C-3623/1–2



Fig. 1. Covered cup from the Chungul Kurgan burial (conserved state) late 12th / beginning of the 13th century, gilded silver, 29.5 x 16.5 cm. Kyiv, Treasury of the National Museum of History of Ukraine. Photo: Dmitriy Klochko.

Keywords:

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Unearthed in 1981 from a medieval burial in the Azov steppe of southern Ukraine, the covered cup from the Chungul Kurgan is a rare and enigmatic object (fig. 1). Created around the year 1200, it was buried only a few decades later with a high-ranking Kipchak (Cuman) nomad. The cup is notable not only for its impressive scale and craftsmanship, but also because it conceals a hydraulic siphon of a type described by the ancient author Hero of Alexandria. This makes it the earliest known example of such a trick vessel after Antiquity.

The Chungul Kurgan burial was extraordinarily rich. The Kipchak warrior's grave was inserted into the center of a reused and much-enlarged Bronze Age burial mound, and he was interred surrounded by five sacrificial horses, ten sheep, and a probable human sacrifice, not

to mention gold-embroidered silk garments, gilded armor, and other objects from Byzantium, the Levant, and Western Europe. The silver-gilt cup was found buried near the right shoulder of the deceased; it had been partially filled with a slurry of liquid and burned herbs before being placed in the grave.¹



Fig. 2. Covered cup from the Chungul Kurgan burial, view of cup interior. Photo: Dmitriy Klochko.

Initially mistaken for an incense burner due to the presence of these charred remains,² the cup was in fact a covered drinking vessel of a type that became popular in the late twelfth

¹ Oleksandr Halenko, Yuriy Rassamakin, Warren Woodfin, and Renata Holod, "Трофеї половецького вождя з Чунгульського кургану: пережиток, ритуальні функції та символіка/Trofeї polovetskoho vozhdia z Chunhul'skoho kurhanu: perezhytok, rytual'ni funksiï, ta symbolika [A Cuman Chief's Trophy from Chunhul Barrow: Reuse, Ritual Functions, and Symbolism]," part I, *Археологія/Arkheolohiia* 3 (2016): 28–48; part II, *Археологія/Arkheolohiia* 4, (2016), 42–71. The textile finds are discussed in Warren Woodfin, Yuriy Rassamakin, and Renata Holod, "Foreign Vesture and Nomadic Identity on the Black Sea Littoral in the Early Thirteenth Century: Costume from the Chungul Kurgan," *Ars Orientalis* 38 (2010): 155–186. The covered cup is discussed extensively in Warren T. Woodfin, "Spilled Wine, Spilled Blood: Spilling the Secrets of the Covered Cup from the Chungul Kurgan," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 87 (2024): 307–344.

² As, for example, in Renate Rolle, Michael Müller-Wille, and Kurt Schietzel (eds.), *Gold der Steppe: Archäologie der Ukraine* (Schleswig: Archäologisches Landesmuseum, 1991), 343, 420–421, cat. 207. For the botanical contents, see L. H. Bezus'ko, V. V. Otroshchenko, R. Ya. Kostyliov, A. P. Olins'ka, Y. Ya. Rassamakin, "Палеоботанічний аналіз органічних залишків з курільниці Чингульського кургану/Paleobotanichniy Analiz Orhanichnykh

century.³ Inside the bowl, a lion rears against the central post, licking a berry-shaped finial (fig. 2). The lion's body is of cast and gilded silver, with an engraved mane and inlaid jet eyes. Its extraordinary plasticity and expressiveness mark it as a work of first quality (fig. 3). The closest stylistic parallels come from Picardy, Flanders, and the Meuse-Rhine region.⁴ The engraved ornament and the applied collar of acanthus leaves can be compared to the decoration of sacred objects from these same regions, though no exact match exists.⁵ The cast and gilded openwork finial (fig. 4), a hollow sphere of tendrils, is highly distinctive, matched most closely by finial of the domed reliquary from the Guelph Treasure, attributed to a Cologne workshop around the year 1200.⁶ The fact that different elements of the cup's design find their best comparisons in disparate locales is notable, although it is clear that the cup was made as a whole and bears no signs of later alteration.⁷

Zalyshkiv iz Kuril'nytsi Chynhuls'koho Kurhanu (Zaporizhs'ka Oblast') [Paleobotanical analysis of the organic remains from the incense burner of the Chynhul Kurhan],"

Український ботанічний журнал/Ukrains'kyi Botanichnyi Zhurnal 46 (1989): 30–32.

³ Woodfin, "Spilled Wine," 315–319. The comprehensive study of the form remains Piotr Skubiszewski, "Romańskie cyboria w kształcie czary z nakrywą. Problem genezy" [Romanesque ciboria in the form of a covered chalice: the problem of origin], *Rocznik historiisztuki* 5 (1965): 7–46.

⁴ Woodfin, "Spilled Wine," 319–325.

⁵ For the applied leaves, see, for example, the cross of Saint-Vincent de Laon, dated to the beginning of the thirteenth century. Paris, Louvre, inv. no. OA 4. See *Une renaissance: L'art entre Flandre et Champagne 1150–1250*, Catalogue de l'exposition tenue à Saint-Omer, musée de l'hôtel Sandelin, 5 avril–30 juin 2013, et à Paris, musée national du Moyen Age, 17 avril–15 juillet 2013 (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux-Grand Palais, 2013), 148, cat. no. 81.

⁶ Dietrich Kötzsche and Lothar Lambacher, *Höhepunkte romanischer Schatzkunst: Die Kuppelreliquiare in London und Berlin und ihr Umkreis* (Berlin: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Preussischer Kulturbesitz, 2006), 58–59.

⁷ The late Boris Marshak proposed that the cup was of Flemish manufacture and later altered into an incense burner by the addition of the openwork finial, which he attributed to Cologne ca. 1170–1190, but this is incorrect. Boris Marshak, *История восточной тореутики III–XIII вв. и проблемы культурной преемственности/Istoriia vostochnoi torevtiki III–XIII vv. i problemy kul'turnoi preemstvennosti* [History of oriental toreutics of the 3rd–15th centuries and problems of cultural continuity] (St. Petersburg: Akademiia issledovaniia kul'tury, 2017), 395, figs. 232, 233.



Fig. 3. Lion and post from interior of covered cup. Photo: Dmitriy Klochko.



Fig. 4. Finial of lid from covered cup. Photo: Dmitriy Klochko.

What sets the cup apart from any contemporaneous object is the siphon mechanism. The central post and finial conceal a siphon consisting of concentric tubes, the outer one opening into the cup through holes in the raised boss on which the lion stands (fig. 5). When filled past a critical point, the vessel's contents would be suctioned via those holes into the central tubes and out the base of the cup—likely onto the lap of an unsuspecting drinker. Vessels animated by this siphon mechanism are described in Hero of Alexandria's famous treatise, the *Pneumatica*, composed in the first or second century CE (fig. 6).⁸ This function parallels the Roman-era cup discovered at Vinkovci, Croatia, where the silver figure of the mythical Tantalus appropriately conceals the central siphon.⁹ A trick cup, or *chantepleure*, possibly concealing a similar hydraulic mechanism was also sketched by Villard de Honnecourt around 1220–1240 (fig. 7).¹⁰ Since the Chungul cup predates any other surviving medieval example of such a device, it suggests that such technological capabilities were being explored earlier than previously thought.¹¹

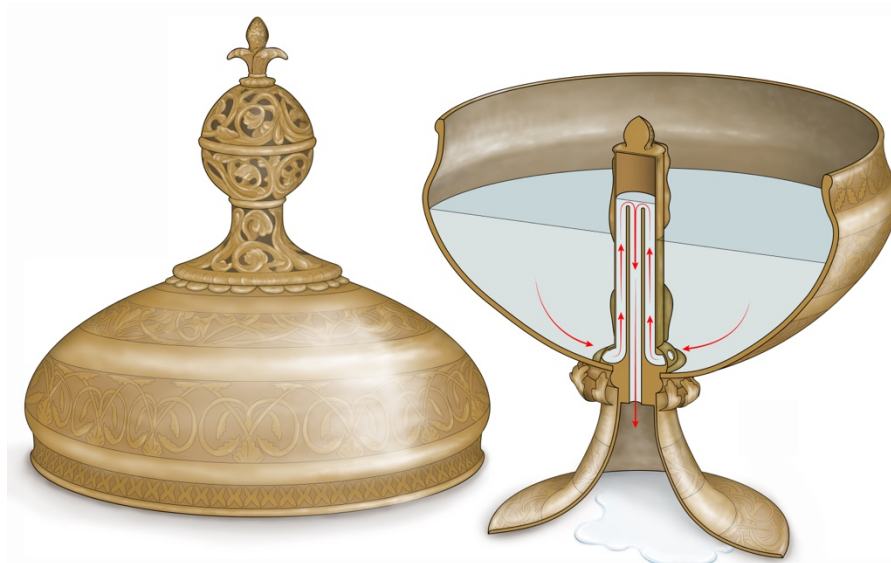


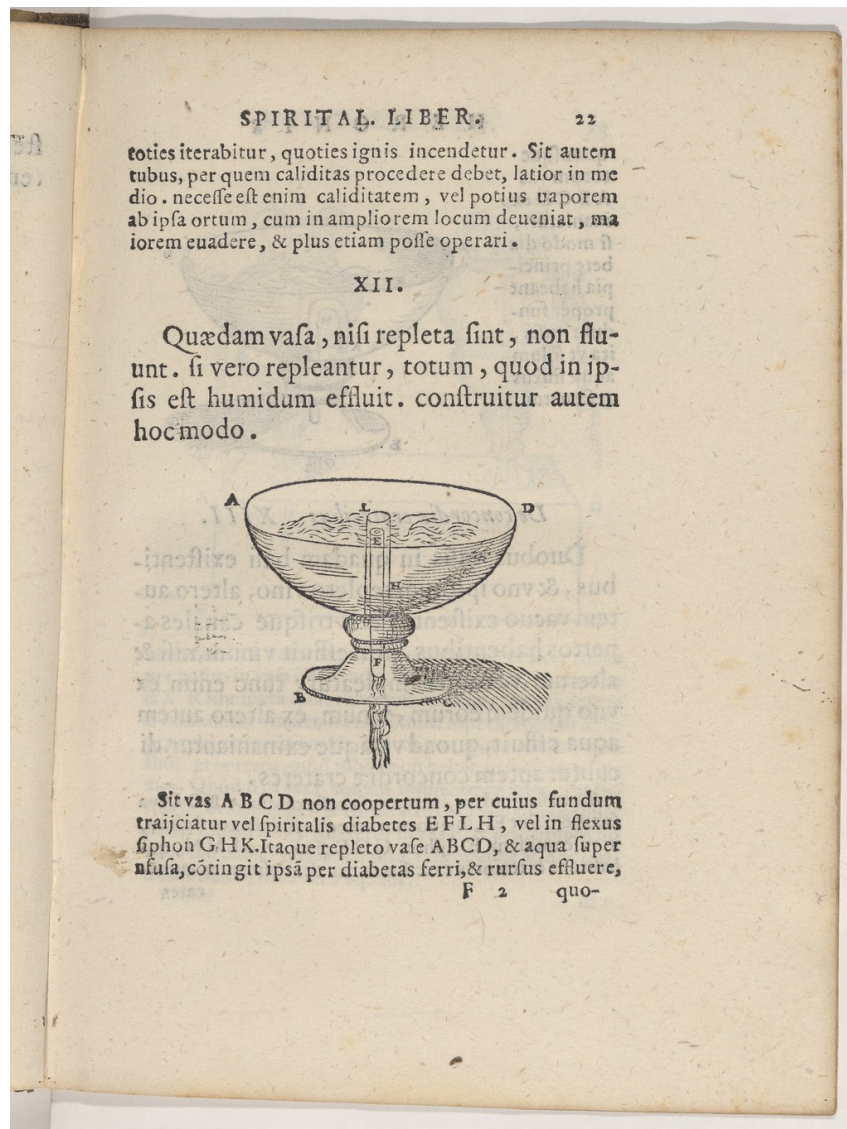
Fig. 5. Diagram of the concealed siphon within the covered cup. Drawing: Matilde Grimaldi

⁸ Hero of Alexandria, *Pneumatica* 13, ed. by Wilhelm Schmidt, *Heronis Alexandrini opera quae supersunt omnia*, vol. 1 (Leipzig: Teubner, 1899), 84; *The Pneumatics of Hero of Alexandria, from the Original Greek*, trans. by Joseph George Greenwood, ed. by Bennet Woodcroft (London: Taylor, Walton and Maberly, 1851), 27.

⁹ Hrvoje Vulić et al., "The Vinkovci Treasure of Late Roman Silver Plate: Preliminary Report," *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 30 (2017): 127–150. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1047759400074055>

¹⁰ Carl F. Barnes, *The Portfolio of Villard de Honnecourt (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, MS Fr 19093): A New Critical Edition and Color Facsimile* (Farnham: Routledge, 2009), 67. Woodfin, "Spilled Wine," 329–332. A similar design survives in the form of the 14th-century Swan Mazer now in the collection of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, on which see Oliver Rackham, *Treasures of Silver at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 57–59, pl. 2.

¹¹ The introduction of Hero of Alexandria's hydraulic technologies in Western Europe is dated to the end of the thirteenth century by Elly Truitt, *Medieval Robots: Mechanism, Magic, Nature, and Art* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 27, 122–125.



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

Fig. 6. Diagram of Hero of Alexandria's vessel with a concentric siphon in Federico Commandino, trans., *Heronis Alexandrini Spiritualium Liber* (Urbino: [Domenico Frisolino], 1575), 22.

The cup is just one of an unusual concentration of Western luxury goods in this burial. The concentration of artifacts suggests a common origin—one might speculate that these goods were spoils from the disastrous 1205 Battle of Adrianople, where Cuman horsemen allied with the Bulgarians routed Crusader forces led by Baldwin of Flanders.¹² Baldwin's court is known to have drawn on artisans from the same regions indicated by the cup's style.¹³ It is

¹² Robert de Clari, *La conquête de Constantinople*, CXII, ed. by Philippe Lauer (Paris: É. Champion, 1956), 105–106; trans. by Edgar Holmes McNeal, *Robert of Clari: The Conquest of Constantinople* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 125–126. A parallel account is given in Geoffroi de Villehardouin, *La conquête de Constantinople*, ed. Natalis de Wallly (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1872), 210–214.

¹³ See especially the cross made by the Mosan master Gerard for Henry of Flanders, regent and subsequently emperor at Constantinople, between 1206 and 1216. Danielle Gaborit-

possible, then, that the cup once belonged to Baldwin or a high-ranking noble in his circle before being taken as spoils of war.

One intriguing aspect of the cup is that, despite its technological and stylistic sophistication, it is made of silver of relatively low purity (approximately 70%). Did the artisans feel that the surface gilding would make using better silver superfluous? Or was the workshop operating in an area where silver was in short supply? Constantinople seems to have been very short on precious metal at the outset of the Latin Empire's control, and the Latin emperors minted coins made of billon, that is, a silver alloy with the majority content of copper or other base metals.¹⁴ Combined with the slightly eclectic style of the vessel, the mismatch between artistic and metallic quality could possibly suggest manufacture in the early years of the Crusader interregnum in Constantinople.

Chopin, "Staurrotheca of Henry of Flanders," in *The Treasury of San Marco in Venice*, ed. David Buckton (Milan: Olivetti, 1984), 244–251, cat. no. 34.

¹⁴ Filip Van Tricht, *The Latin Renovatio of Byzantium: The Empire of Constantinople (1204–1228)* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 132; Alan Stahl, "Coinage and Money in the Latin Empire of Constantinople," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 55 (2001): 197–206.



Fig. 7. Villard de Honnecourt, sketchbook leaf showing drawing of a chantepleure, ink on parchment, 23.5 x 15.5 cm. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS fr. 19093, fol. 9r.
Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France.

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Warren T. Woodfin, “Spilled Wine, Spilled Blood: Spilling the Secrets of the Covered Cup from the Chungul Kurgan,” *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 87 (2024): 307–344.

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