

## The Seuso Treasure – Background information

**In its currently known form the Seuso treasure is made up of fourteen silver vessels for dining and washing as well as a copper cauldron that was used to hide them.** The treasure trove comprises the following pieces: two large flat platters for serving food (the Seuso or Hunting Platter, and the Geometric Platter); two serving platters that were probably used as ornamental platters too (the Achilles and the Meleager platters); a basin probably used for washing the hands and face accompanied by two ewers with geometric designs; three other ewers – one depicting Dionysiac scenes, one with animal figures and one decorated with scenes from Greek mythology (Hippolytus Ewer) –; two situlae related in their decoration to the Hippolytus Ewer; a casket used for storing perfume flasks; and an amphora. All of them were hidden in a large copper cauldron.

**The Hungarian State has recently repatriated the currently known seven remaining silver vessels of the treasure trove: the Achilles Platter, the Meleager Platter, the Hippolytus Ewer and the two Hippolytus situlae, the Animal Ewer and the Amphora. Thus, Hungary is now the full-fledged owner of the complete Seuso treasure, an invaluable ensemble of late Roman imperial artefacts representing the highest artistic quality.**

### The newly repatriated pieces:

1. The largest piece of the Seuso treasure is the **Achilles Platter**: a flat silver platter with a diameter of 72 cm and a weight of about 11.8 kg. It is adorned with scenes from the life of Achilles, the most famous and remarkable hero of the Trojan War. Depicted on the vessel's broad rim, under the medallion, is the birth of Achilles watched by the gods Zeus, Apollo, Helios, Hermes and Poseidon as well as by Heracles. Achilles was disguised in a maiden's clothes by his mother, Thetis, on the island of Skyros, in order to prevent him from dying in the Trojan War, as prophesied. However, the cunning Odysseus and Diomedes tricked Achilles into joining the Greek warriors fighting at the walls of Troy: upon hearing the sound of the trumpet calling to battle, Achilles in women's attire inadvertently grabbed a spear and a shield, thus revealing his true identity. The silversmith captured this moment of tension in the centre of the platter.

The rim of the platter, which was used for serving food and probably also as an ornamental platter, is decorated by an additional three scenes, which are separated by three masks each placed on a pedestal. The rivalry between Athena and Poseidon for the rule over Athens is featured above the medallion, while a Dionysiac procession is depicted on each side.

The Achilles Platter is formed from a single thick cast silver plate, and its rim is lined with beads. The relief scenes were made from the front side of the platter.

2. The abundantly adorned **Meleager Platter** was also probably used for serving food and as an ornamental platter. The medallion in the centre of the vessel bears the relief depiction of a famous ancient Greek hunting story featuring the heroes of the hunt for the Calydonian

Boar. The platter with a diameter of 69.4 cm and a weight of 8.6 kg was named after Meleager, who killed the ferocious animal; his figure can be seen in the middle of the platter as he is resting together with the trophy he won. Behind him is Atalanta, who was the first to wound the boar and to whom Meleager gave the trophy as a gift. His gesture sparked off an argument between the hunters and eventually led to Meleager's death. They are surrounded by other participants in the hunt, including Castor and Pollux, known as the Dioscuri.

Additional mythological scenes are depicted on the rim of the platter: the judgement of Paris, giving the golden apple to Aphrodite, the most beautiful of the goddesses, and famous myths of love including the depiction of Perseus, who clasping the severed head of the Gorgon Medusa rescues Andromeda chained to a rock, that of Phaedra, who fell in love with her stepson, Hippolytus, as well as the story of the ill-fated lovers, Pyramus and Thisbe, forbidden by their parents to wed. The wide band between the medallion in the centre and the rim of the platter is decorated with acanthus leaves.

The Meleager Platter was fashioned from a thick cast silver plate and has a beaded rim. The relief scenes were made from the front side of the platter, similarly to the Achilles Platter.

The relief rendering of the story of **Hippolytus and Phaedra** can be seen in three other gilded silver vessels of the Seuso treasure, namely the Hippolytus Ewer and a pair of situlae. These probably formed part of a single bathing set, as suggested by all three vessels bearing two scenes of the same story – written by the Greek tragedian Euripides (5<sup>th</sup> century BC) and later by the Roman poet Ovid (1<sup>st</sup> century AD) – although rendered in different styles. One of these scenes shows Phaedra sitting in despair on a chair surrounded by her servants as she is agonising over her love for her stepson, Hippolytus. The other scene, separated from the first one by architectural elements, pillars and a vaulted gate, features Hippolytus getting ready for the hunt after being presented with Phaedra's love letter from the old nanny and throwing it on the ground to express his rejection of his step-mother's love.

3. The two scenes of the love story of Hippolytus and Phaedra can be seen in the middle register of the body of the **Hippolytus Ewer** (height: c. 57 cm, weight: 4 kg) and are lined from above by a frieze featuring a wild boar and lion hunt, and from the bottom by the depiction of centaurs hunting animals. The top of the ewer's handle has a masterfully executed thumbpiece: a gilded lion figure fashioned from solid silver. Several traces of gilding can be seen on the ewer decorated with embossed scenes.

4-5. The **Hippolytus situlae** used for carrying water (height: c. 23 cm, diameter: c. 25 cm, weight: 4.4 kg each) are covered on their entire surface with the above-described scenes. Each of the two vessels stand on three figures of griffin, and the handle of each one is decorated with male busts. Traces of gilding can still be seen on the bodies of the situlae with embossed decoration.

6. The **Animal Ewer** (volume: c. 4 litres, height: 51 cm, weight: c. 4 kg) was probably also part of a set used for washing. It stands on a decagonal base and its entire surface is decorated with hexagonal fields (120 in total). Some of the hexagons are adorned with plant motifs, and others with animal or human figures. Among the masterfully engraved lions, boars, bears and hares the figures of *bestiarii* – men holding whips in their hands engaged in combat with beasts in

amphitheatres – are also depicted. The upper part of the ewer and its hemispherical lid are embellished with male busts and heads. The engraved depictions are further adorned with niello inlays and gilding.

7. The gilded and embossed **Amphora** (height: 38.5 cm, weight: 2.5 kg) was used for serving wine. Its decoration is also linked to **Dionysus**: the central figure of the main scene, Dionysus, can be seen on one side of the vessel as he is leaning on his pine cone-topped staff and pouring wine into the mouth of a panther sitting at his feet. His figure is flanked on both sides by maenads, a satyr, Silenus and the goat-legged Pan. Succumbing to Dionysus's power, the figures holding a shepherd's crook, a basket, a wineskin, musical instruments and carrying the severed head of a sacrificial goat form a single procession in a state of delirious revelry. The other side of the amphora features Dionysus as a child riding a huge goat and holding his staff topped with a pine cone.

Aquatic birds and salt water fish can be seen under the Dionysiac procession and above it the depiction of lions and a leopard hunting a gazelle, a wild donkey and a deer as well as dogs hunting a boar. The bottom of the vessel is embellished with a wreath of oak leaves, while its neck is covered with acanthus leaves. The amphora's handles are solid silver panther figures with the stopper affixed to one of them.

#### **The pieces repatriated in 2014:**

1. The most famous piece of the treasure trove is a silver platter (diameter: 70.5 cm, weight: c. 8.8 kg) with its centre adorned by the depiction of an open-air banquet flanked by hunting scenes. Named the **Hunting Platter** after its decoration, the scenes of the central medallion are framed by a Latin verse inscription, which reads *HEC SEUSO TIBI DURENT PER SAECULA MULTA / POSTERIS UT PROSINT VASCULA DIGNA TUIS* (May these, O Seuso, yours for many ages be / Small vessels fit to serve your offspring worthily). Seuso, referred to in the inscription, must have been the owner of the treasure trove and was probably presented with this platter and possibly with the other pieces of the banquet set on the occasion of a prominent family event, perhaps a wedding. Engraved between the beginning and the end of the inscription is a Christogram framed by a wreath.

The medallion in the centre of the platter is divided into three parts by the scenes it bears: the upper register contains the depiction of a mounted hunter and his hound driving some deer towards an outstretched net, while the lower register shows a boar hunting scene; in the middle register, composed around the centre of the platter, there are banqueters resting on cushions arranged in a semicircle: a woman turning towards the central male figure, perhaps as an expression of their belonging together, and four men. On the table before them is a fish, while two servants are offering them more food and drink and others are processing the animals they had hunted. A canopy is suspended above the hunting company between the branches of two trees. The picnic is set by the bank of a river, which is indicated by the depiction closing the scene at the bottom: a body of water abundant in fish. The location of the feast is alluded to by the inscription *PELSO* – the name of Lake Balaton in Latin – engraved into a longish field on the river-bank. The other inscription of the middle scene (*INOCENTIUS*) is probably the name of the horse tied to the tree. The depictions running

around the rim of the platter feature scenes of bear, antelope, leopard, wild donkey, boar, gazelle and hare hunting as well as people returning from hunts carrying the prey.

The platter was made from a single thick cast silver plate. The scenes were engraved into the surface and were embellished with niello inlays and gilding. The inscriptions on the front were engraved at the same time as the other decorative details; hence, the piece must have been made specifically for Seuso, probably on the occasion of a prominent event.

2. The so-called **Geometric Platter** with a diameter of 64.2 cm and a weight of 7.15 kg is somewhat smaller than the Hunting Platter but was also used for serving food. Its name comes from the decoration in its middle composed of rosette and palmette motifs arranged in intersecting octagons and squares inside a circular field. The engraved motifs inlaid in black niello are framed by a gilded band.

3-4. Each one of the two **geometric ewers** has a height of about 55 cm, a weight of about 2.8 kg and a volume of 4 litres. A large part of their bodies and bases are covered with geometric and plant motifs in circular fields; the upper register of their bodies is adorned with wavy lines resembling those on the washing basin. The mouth of each ewer is further embellished with openwork tendril motifs at the handle. Traces of gilding are visible in several places. These ewers were probably used to pour water for washing the hands during banquets.

5. The deep **basin** with a diameter of about 46 cm, a weight of about 2 kg and a volume of 6 litres is decorated with embossed wavy lines and was probably used for washing. It is hammered from a single sheet silver and its centre is embellished with plant motifs arranged in hexagons. The bases of the two geometric ewers fit into the middle of the washing basin. It can be assumed that the three vessels form part of the same washing set.

6. The **Dionysus Ewer** is the smallest (height: 43.5 cm, weight: 3 kg, volume: 4 litres) of the five ewers that form part of the Seuso treasure but thanks to its ornamentation it is also the most fascinating of them all. Standing on an octagonal base and ribbed into eight sections, the body of the vessel is completely covered with embossed figures – Dionysus and his entourage of maenads, satyrs and the goat-legged Pan – each featured in a separate field. The revellers carrying torches, musical instruments as well as pine cone-topped shepherd's staffs and shepherd's crooks form a wild procession led by Dionysus. The areas above and under the figures are filled in with grape and acanthus tendril motifs in relief; the ewer's neck is covered with acanthus leaves. The decoration suggests that the vessel was used for pouring wine.

7. The cylindrical **toilet casket** with a lid is decorated with embossed figural scenes belonging to the female sphere: the depiction in the front shows servants carrying various implements for beauty treatments to a woman sitting on a chair, while there is a bathing scene on the casket's back. The cone-shaped lid is embossed with masks and Eros figures carrying garlands, while the handle bears an embossed Gorgon's head. The perforated silver plate affixed to the vessel's interior suggests that this relatively large casket (height: 32 cm, diameter: 21 cm, weight: c. 2 kg) was used for storing perfume flasks.

8. The fourteen silver vessels were hidden in a large **copper cauldron**, which also forms part of the Seuso treasure. This is suggested by the impressions left by the beaded rim of the heavy platters on the inside of the cauldron. These impressions helped to ascertain the original arrangement of the silverware inside the cauldron: the four large platters were put at the bottom face down and laid one on top of the other, while the smaller vessels were placed at the top. Hammered and riveted together from two sheets, the cylindrical cauldron originally had a bulgy bottom; its side is stepped in one place. Based on its shape and technique, it belongs to the cauldron type that spread in the 2<sup>nd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> centuries AD in the Rhineland and the Danube region of the Roman Empire. The southernmost finds of this type originate from the Transdanubian area of Pannonia. The cauldron with a diameter of 83 cm and a height of 32.5 cm can be dated to the 3<sup>rd</sup> or the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD.