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Early Ottoman Silver Gilt Cup with Tughra of Sultan Selim I

Ottoman Balkans, Reign of Selim I (1512-1520)

Silver gilt

9.5cm diameter, 3.5cm deep

Stock no.: A5758

Provenance: From the estate of the art historian Richard Ettinghausen.

This small drinking vessel comes from an important group of Balkan hemispherical silver gilt bowls, produced in the late 15th and 16th century.¹ They were made in the metal rich areas of Bosnia, Herzegovina, Serbia, and Bulgaria, which were the primary sources of silver within the Ottoman Empire.² These bowls were primarily used in secular settings for drinking wine or sherbet.³ However, Arabic and Cyrillic inscriptions on some bowls attest to their use by in both Christian and Muslim religious settings.⁴ The present example is stamped with the tughra of Selim I, reading 'Sultan Salimshah bin Bayezid', which dates the bowl to 1512-1520. Selim I learned the craft of goldsmithing (*kuyumculuk*) as a young man, and continued to patronise the goldsmith's guild throughout his reign.⁵

The bowl is engraved with arabesques, comprising *rumi* split palmette motifs and *hatayi* or Chinese blossoms. The *rumi-hatayi* style is most commonly associated with *Baba Nakkaş* (literally Papa Designer) Iznik ceramics of the late 15th century, which went through a revival in the 16th century. A border of knotted fret, also derived from Chinese ceramics, runs below the rim on the exterior of the bowl. The inside of the bowl is lightly engraved with *rumi-hatayi* arabesques.

A small hole 2mm in diameter pierces the base of the bowl where a decorative disc would have been inserted to form a raised omphalos. These disks were held in place by pins, often in the form of animals, particularly deer. An example of this form, with a gold omphalos disc decorated with three birds, can be seen in the Victoria & Albert Museum (accession no. [M.11-1953](#)). This form became more popular in the second half of the 16th century, as under the rule of Selim II (r. 1566-1574) the ban

on the drinking of wine was lifted. The present bowl is therefore a rare early example of the form.

A bowl dating to 1580-1587 (reign of Bayezit II) of similar form and engraved with a pattern of Ottoman foliate arabesques is in the Benaki Museum, Athens (no. 14074).⁶ Its detachable base is decorated with more arabesques, and at the centre there is a small cast lion. The base has Greek inscriptions, indicating that this object was for use in the Archbishopric of Euripos in the Greek island of Evia. Other collections of similar Balkan bowls can be found in museums in Hungary and Sofia, Bulgaria. A large horde of Balkan silver gilt bowls was discovered in Serbia; they are of the same hemispherical form and decorated with floral and plant arabesques. This group is now housed in the Hungarian National Museum,⁷ whose director, Géza Féher, writes that they date back “almost without exception to the 16th century...owing to the 17th-century decline of the Ottoman Empire”.⁸ Another group of these bowls is housed in the National Archaeological Institute Museum in Sofia (nos 33, 971, 835, 750, and 3773).⁹

[1] Ballian, Anna. ‘Silverwork Produced in Ottoman Trikala (Thessaly): Problems of Taxonomy and Interpretation’, in Ibolya Gerelyes and Maximilian Hartmuth (eds). *Ottoman Metalwork in the Balkans and in Hungary*. Budapest: Hungarian National Museum, 2015. pp. 11- 35; p. 14.

[2] *Ibid.* p. 14.

[3] Stankova, Lilyana. ‘Sixteenth-Century Silver Vessels from the Collections of Sofia’s National Archaeological Institute with Museum and National Historical Museum’ in Gerelyes and Hartmuth. *op. cit.* pp. 163-179; p. 176.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 163.

[5] Féher, Géza. ‘Ottoman Remains and Treasures in Hungary’. *Erdem* 9.26 (1996), pp. 665- 692; p. 674.

[6] Illustrated in Ballian, Anna (ed.) *Relics of the Past: Treasures of the Greek Orthodox Church and the Population Exchange*. Benaki Museum/ 5 Continents Editions: Milan, 2011. p. 158.

[7] Illustrated in Féher. *op. cit.* Fig. 111.19.

[8] *Ibid.*, 675.

[9] Illustrated in Stankova. *op. cit.* Figs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5.