# THE ICONOGRAPHY OF SOME PIECES OF LITURGICAL ORFEVRERIE BELONGING TO THE CISNADIE TREASURE

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#### The treasure of the Evangelical Church in Cisnadie / Heltau, Romania

The precious treasure of the Evangelical Church in Cisnadie (Rill, 1985: 75-83) reflects how thriving the Saxon community of Cisnadie was in olden times. While the large amounts of money donated by generous and pious parishioners were spent on necessary restorations and changes of the church, the famous ecclesiastical vessels used during the pompous Catholic divine services held in the parish Church, still exist today. Hidden behind fake walls, in the so called *Schatzkammer*, they survived the troubled times of the Reformation, when many such ecclesiastical vessels, which had become redundant, were melted with the purpose of recovering the precious metals; this was, unfortunately, the case in Sibiu / *Hermannstadt* (the administrative and cultural capital of Transylvania in the Mediaeval Ages) and in other communities. Although the secret was well kept, the legend of a hen with golden eggs and of a treasure buried somewhere in the fortified church, but also of a curse which would fall upon those who might attempt to steal it, went around for centuries (Schullerus, 2002:225).

Since 1915, the Brukenthal Museum has the custody of these nine masterpieces of liturgical orfevrerie, which are a testimonial to the outstanding craftsmanship and artistic level reached by the art of silversmithing in Sibiu.

The famous reliquary-cross and one of the chalices comprising the above mentioned treasure, as well as other objects and various documents, show that between the 14<sup>th</sup> and the 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, the community still had strong spiritual links with the country their forefathers had left in order to settle in Transylvania. In keeping with their faith and traditional rituals, the groups of colonists invoked the protection of their ancient patron saints (Huß, 1922: 35-118).

Towards the middle of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the "priores flandrenses" were on their way to Transylvania, via Magdeburg. From Magdeburg, they brought their first collections of prayers, religious hymns and teachings, later gathered in the *Codex Heltensis* (*Das Heltauer Missale*) – which was still in use in the community church in

the 14<sup>th</sup> century, only to be replaced in the 15<sup>th</sup> century by *Codex Cibiniensis* (*Das Hermannstädter Missale*) (Schullerus, 2002: 214-215).

This study focuses on the analysis of the iconography of the two above mentioned pieces and is intended to bring arguments in favour of the assertion that they are the creation of local silversmiths as special commissions for the parish Church in Cisnadie.

### The chalice with engravings of the Patron Saints of the Evangelical Church in Cisnadie

The first piece is a gilded silver (875‰) chalice dating from the first half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century (picture 1). The outstanding quality of its rich decoration allows for the assertion that it is one of the most beautiful chalices ever made in Transylvania. The base of the cup, supported by overlapping stylized flames, is surmounted by a frieze of lilies (*Lilienfries*) – Gothic motif, new in the art of silver work in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. but frequently employed later. On the smooth surface of the tall cup, small Gothic letters unfold the inscription Domine ihesv c[h]riste misere nobis. The hexagonal stem, with the initial letter M[aria] engraved on one side, is encircled by a band in the shape of a cornice; the flattened, spherical knot has rhomboidal buttons with interpolating rosettes and leaves in relief on the inside. Three of the lobes of the hexagonal base are engraved with stylized foliate ornaments and with the representations of St Walpurga and St. Servatius – accompanied by their names, inscribed in Gothic minuscules: s[ancta] walpvrga and s[anctus] servacius. A new decorative element, employed by the artisan to mark the lower part of the decoration on the bottom, is the twisted wire. On the inside of the bottom of the chalice, we have the initial letter of the donor and his place of origin: L.ad cristain de insvla (= L.[adislaus?] from Cristian).

All these constitutive elements and innovative decorations stand proof of the artistic evolution of Transylvanian chalices and, by comparison with other Transylvanian and European chalices and goblets, are very important dating sources.

In the 14<sup>th</sup> and in the 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, in Western and Central Europe, craftsmen began engraving figures of saints on liturgical vessels. Usually they were the patron saints of the local communities, but there were also other saints, whose cult was less wide spread. In choosing the saints which would adorn the vessels, the artisans did not follow a certain rule; they were patron saints of the community church, of a chapel, of

an altar, of a Christian order, of a guild or of a brotherhood (Braun, 1932: 191-192). The images representing saints were generally completed by their specific attributes and sometimes by an inscription mentioning their names. However, their identification is, somewhat, difficult not only because many saints had common attributes, but also because, in many cases, the differentiating attributes or the inscriptions with their names are damaged.

In the art of orfevrerie, the figurative ornamentation required complex craftsmanship skills and manufacturing techniques which most craftsmen had not acquired. In renowned European workshops, in order to carry out an important commission, they worked with engravers, enamellers, sculptors and jewellers. In Transylvania, it wasn't until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when goldsmiths specialized in jewellery and in the setting of precious stones, that silversmithing and goldsmithery became separated. A silversmith's talent was best revealed in the way he processed the precious metal and, especially, in the way he combined a great variety of techniques. Most Transylvanian silversmiths specialized in certain techniques, such as the laying of filigree enamel – renowned in Europe from 1508 as *modo transsilvano*; and, indeed, the name given to this technique, shows that the craftsmen had little, if any, competition (Wetter 2004: 263).

The two saints - Walpurga and Servatius – represented on the base of the Cisnadie chalice, are part of the large group of Frank saints / "fränkischen Heiligen" (Reinerth, 1972: 83-95) whose cult was venerated by the colonists in their new land. Saint Walpurga was the patron saint of the Cisnadie parish church (Schuller, o.j.: 2), while Saint Servatius was one of the local patron saints.

Although the physiognomy of Saint Walpurga is deteriorated, the plastic depiction of her portrait is evident. Placed against the portal of a Gothic chapel, the saint is described, in another work which pre-dates the deterioration of the chalice, wearing a crown with a halo (Roth, 1908: 89), her right hand raised – holding probably one of her specific attributes. Her vestment falls in ample folds; the ability with which the artist alternates the smooth, shiny surfaces with those shaded off by delicate hachure, gives the whole figure an impression of tridimensionality.

Saint Walpurga, and her two brothers, Wunebald and Willibald, together with many other nuns and monks, assisted Pope Boniface in his missionary work in Germany. She was buried in Eichstät, in the church of the convent which carries her name. Miraculous cures are ascribed to the oil that exceeds from her tombstone. In

893, her relics were transferred to various places, such as the Rhine area, Flanders and France, where she was worshipped. In her icons, the most common representations are the crown, the sceptre and a flask of oil. Saint Walpurga's feast is on May 1<sup>st</sup>, date which coincides with the pagan festival marking the beginning of spring, when the witches and other occult folk can celebrate before being banished by the dawn of this saint's special day, hence the tradition of the Walpurgis Night. It is possible that the protection of crops ascribed to her, represented by three ears of corn in her icons, may have been transferred to her from Mother Earth / "Walborg" (Farmer, 1999: 528-529). Manuscripts and incunabula found in Sibiu and Cisnadie describe the rituals and prayers performed there and they are identical with those performed in Cologne, Regensburg, Freisinger or Esztèrgom (Zender, 1959: 89-90).

The 13<sup>th</sup> century chalice from the Saint Walpurga convent in Eichstätt, has a circular decorated base: stylized foliate ornaments, gems *en cabochons*, and four decorative sheets with the representations of the Crucifixion, the images of Saint Walpurga, Saint Willibald and Saint Wunebald accompanied by their inscribed names: *JESUS CHRISTU[S]*, *SANCTA WALPURGIS*, *S. WILEBALDUS*, *S. WUNEBALDUS* (Braun, 1932: 85, 147, 174, 191, plate 16 / fig. 51). Normally, each saint and each allegorical scene are accompanied by a separate inscription. Inscriptions engraved in Gothic capital letters unfold either on the cup of the chalice or on the base (as is the case of the Eichstätt chalice). Later, towards the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the silversmiths introduced the first inscriptions in small Gothic letters; the bands bearing inscriptions also played a decorative role in the epoch.

During 1985-1986, the Evangelical Church in Cisnadie underwent ample restoration works which led to the discovery, on the right wall of the choir apse, behind the altar, of a fresco representing Saint Walpurga and, on the opposite wall, of the portrait of a priest in red vestments, accompanied by the inscription *Petrus Plebanus*. It seems that *Petrus Plebanus* played a major role in the construction of the church, but it must have been before 1327 – the year when the church registers begin enumerating the priests who served in the church in the centuries to follow (Schullerus, 2002: 214).

The second figure engraved on the base of the Cisnadie chalice is that of Saint Servatius (Servacius), sitting in front of a Gothic chapel, wearing the vestment and the mitre of a bishop; the saint's right hand, raised, holds a big, double key, while in his left hand he carries a bishop's crozier.

Saint Servatius, who died in 384, was Bishop of Tongern and Maastricht. According to one of the legends accumulated round the historical figure of the bishop, Saint Peter handed Servatius the key to the Gates of Heaven, which gave him the power to forgive sins, and to open the Gates to all those deserving of eternal life. Thus, the key became one of his characteristic attributes and it is still a revered relic in the church dedicated to him in Maastricht. A determined prosecutor of Aryanism, in later representations, Saint Servatius is also depicted trampling under his feet, or placing his crozier, on a dragon (Keller, 1975: 453-454). (He was also invoked against diseases and had fountains with life-giving water dedicated to him, against rats, and mice – having an eagle as attribute –, and as protector of the crops – with the sun as attribute, etc). Together with Saint Pankratius and Saint Bonifacius, Saint Servatius is one of the "Ice Saints" (Huß, 1922: 48).

His cult and his feast, which are on May 13<sup>th</sup>, were brought to Transylvania by the colonists coming from the Meuse-Rhine area. He was dedicated the parish church in Cristian / *Grossau*, first mentioned in documents in 1498, an altar in Biertan / *Birthälm*, a chapel in Şeica-Mare / *Grossschelken* attested in 1520 (the name of the hill on which the chapel is situated on, is "af'm Zerwes"), a fountain in Hamba / *Hahnbach* – hence the name of the surrounding meadow, "Bäm Zerwesbrannen"; also, there are many families whose names derives from the name of the Saint: "Zerbes" (Reinerth, 1962: 46-49). In conclusion, Saint Servatius was one of the most popular saints revered by the Saxons in County Sibiu. His prayers and rituals are identical with those held in Liège, in Walloon.

## The reliquary-cross from Cisnadie, decorated with representations of Local Saints in the technique of translucent enamel

Saint Servatius is one of the figures depicted on the base of the reliquary-cross from Cisnadie. The above mentioned cross – and the monstrance from the same parish church – are two of the most spectacular pieces of silver work ever produced in Transylvanian workshops before the Reformation (Damboiu, 2008: 66-70, 295-298). However, in accordance with the subject of this paper, we will only discuss the reliquary-cross, richly ornamented with the images of the local patron saints, whose identification, association and interpretation resemble the "reading" of the images painted on the altars or on the walls of Catholic churches. In a time when few people could read and write, the iconography of the Holy Family and of the patron saints was

fascinating, inspiring and it was attributed the quality of performing miracles.

The reliquary-cross, approx. 1440, is a 750 % silver mould piece, harmonious and lissome (picture 2). In the middle of the cross the artisan riveted a small representation of Jesus (with a big ruby set to mark the chest wound), crucified on an engraved tree (the branches of the tree are aligned with genuine pearls, very expensive in those times); the club shaped margins of the cross are decorated with the apocalyptic symbols of the four evangelists, copied after the models applied on the Gospel of the Lord from Neutra, Slovakia (Wetter, 2006: 647-648) - dated at the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The circulation of certain patterns and sketches of decorations used by silversmiths in their workshops (especially the friezes used to decorate the brim of the chalices or the galleries of the base) was a common thing and we often find them used on pieces produced at a later date. On each margin of the cross' reverse sides, a big, oval-shaped crystallite is set, and up above, in the middle, there is a small case in which relics were kept; according to legend they were splinters from the Holy Cross (Schullerus, 2002: 232-233). The pelican and his nest with hatchlings, symbolizing the Sacrifice of Christ, surmount the eagle / symbol of Saint John.

On the foot of the cross, where big, round lobes interpose smaller, triangular ones, the artist depicted eight saints whose identification wasn't always accurate in the past; their images are engraved and covered with translucent enamel in hues of green, blue and yellow:

1. In the middle lobe, under the cross, we have the ARCHANGEL MICHAEL. The image of the saint, accompanied by fragments of inscriptions (with only a few letters still readable: [..]old[...]), is not difficult to recognize: he is depicted in the very act of slaying the dragon. He is a winged saint, and his physiognomy as well as his clothes, are to be seen later on the Sighisoara / Schäβburg fresco (approx. 1483 Vatasianu, 1959: 764, 766). His feast is celebrated on September 29<sup>th</sup> (Huß, 1922: 44-45) and his depiction on the reliquary-cross is not at all surprising, since he is the patron saint of all the Catholic churches in Transylvania. The reliquary-cross is, as previously mentioned, part of the treasure found in the Cisnadie parish church, so that it would not come amiss to mention the fact that one of the neighbouring villages, as well as the hill on which the Romanic fortified church was erected, are called Michelsberg.

- 2. To the right, on the small triangular lobe, we have SAINT BARBARA (picture 3); at her feet, the artist engraved the figure of a bear (*Bär* in German), and next to it, the inscription: *bra*, thus giving us a clue as to her identity: together they make up the name Barb[a]ra! The saint wears a crown on her head and in her right hand she holds a prayer book a symbol of her faith in Christ. On her left, there is a stylized and gilded tower, her defining attribute (Hall, 1992: 40-41). Very popular in Transylvania, venerated especially before the Reformation, Saint Barbara is one of the five "Virgines capitales" (the others being Mary Magdalene, Catherine, Margaret and Dorothea). Her feast is celebrated on December 4<sup>th</sup> and she is invoked against lightning as well as against sudden and violent death.
- On the big lobe on the right, we have SAINT WALBURGA, patron saint of the parish church of Cisnadie (picture 4). On the left of her image, an inscription reads Wilibald; on her right, symmetrically, the artist seems to have inscribed the name of her other brother, Wunibald / Winibald; the symmetry is completed by two tiny stars which accompany the names of the saint's two brothers. At Walburga's feet, we have the remaining fragments of another inscription: ... [r]g[ae?] a[ve?]. She is depicted in the manner of the Quattrocento Italian paintings: a maphorion covers her head and body and in her hands she holds the flask of oil, which is one of her attributes (Hall, 1992: 202-204). At Wappurga's feet, the artisan placed a dog. (The presence of the dog – which is the symbol of fertility, health, good luck, and plenty in the house and the farm fields, but which is also a guide to heaven –, should be in connection with "Walpurga's nights" / Walpurgisnacht – a festival of major importance in Heathen times, and continued to keep strong hold of the minds and feelings of the Germanic folk down to present days. The strange pairing between a witch and a saint of the church, celebrated on the 1st of May, may be explained by the superstition and the miracles of healing and renewal of the beginning of spring.) The prayers delivered during the mass held in Sibiu and Cisnadie on May 1st are identical with those delivered in Cologne, Aachen and Liège (Reinerth, 1963: 138).
- 4. The next saint is SAINT MARGARET of Antioch. She is rather more difficult to identify because the enamel has receded into indistinctness, thus leading to lack of clarity of outline and detail; still, in her

left hand, she appears to be holding a basket, probably with apples and roses, one of her attributes; at her feet there is the depiction of the demon she defeated with her faith. Being one of the "Virgines capitales" she was very popular in Transylvania, and, on the day her feast is celebrated – July  $20^{th}$  – she is invoked as protectress of mothers and motherhood, of peasants and of all those who are in need of, at least, a little bit of luck (Huß,1922: 68).

- 5. SAINT NICHOLAS, the next saint to be represented on the foot of the reliquary-cross, is quite easy to recognize and identify. Protector of children, of virgins, of sailors and of travellers, Saint Nicholas of Bari is depicted in his bishop's dress, with his usual attributes: the crozier and the book. Under his feet there appears the monstrous whale "Leviathan", in a rare, but suggestive, connection with Saint Nicholas (in the mediaeval bestiaries, Leviathan represents not only the biggest of the marine monsters, in other words, a daemon of waters, but also the myth of the isle-whale as a kind of religious unshipping, with the saying of the liturgy on the animal's back) (Clébert, 1995: 29-31). In Cisnadie, a chapel built in a field was dedicated to him (Huß, 1922: 50). His feast is celebrated on December 6<sup>th</sup> in accordance with the Roman rite and the rituals are identical with those from Cologne and Esztergom
- 6. The warrior saint depicted in the next image was wrongly identified with Saint George. The Medieval armour, the red cross on his shield badge of the Sardinian Order of Saint Mauritius (on the lower part of the shield there is a fragment of an inscription: *uilm*) the crown, the banner in his right hand and, especially, his dark complexion, are distinct characteristics of SAINT MAURICE. He crushed a daemon under his heels, symbolizing his martyrdom for Christianity. Saint Maurice is one of the so-called Frank saints (together with Sts Servatius and Walpurga), and was often represented in works of the German and Italian Renaissance. To this day, his name continues to be greatly revered in the Cologne area and his feast is celebrated on September 2<sup>nd</sup>.
- 7. On the big lobe on the left, we have the second patron saint of the Cisnadie parish church, SAINT SERVATIUS (picture 5). He is depicted in a bishop's dress, with a key in his left hand, one of his attributes, which caused him to be mistaken for Saint Peter. The dragon wriggling at his feet

symbolizes the fact that St Servatius was a prosecutor of Aryanism. On the philactera which unfolds on the left of the image the artist probably inscribed the saint's name.

8. The last saint to appear on the reliquary-cross is SAINT ANTHONY, who is considered to have initiated hermitry. We owe the most plausible identification of the saint to the art historian Virgil Vatasianu (1959: 883). Depicted as an elderly, bearded monk, he is accompanied by his attributes: the raven and the bread (when Anthony was starving in the desert, the raven brought him some bread). His devotees invoke him against sickness (in Transylvania there even existed a brotherhood of hospitals – "Hospitalbrüderschaft des heiligen Antonius") and the peasants invoke him as patron of animals as well as against fire (Huß, 1922: 61). His feast is celebrated on January 17<sup>th</sup> and he is still greatly revered in Cologne and Magdeburg (Hall, 1992: 21-22).

Undoubtedly, the reliquary-cross is a display of craftsmanship, both technically and artistically, but the artisan does not seem to master the technique of enamelling, since he applied the translucent enamel quite clumsily.

One of the compositional elements, with a unique decorative effect, is the knot of the cross, in the shape of a late Gothic chapel. In the eight niches of the chapel there are eight tiny statues of saints; their identification is rather difficult because we have few indices / attributes. In the middle we have the statue of the Virgin and Child; a silver enamelled phylactery unfolds a fragment of inscription, possibly: s[ancta] • m[aria] [...]. On her right, one of the saints, probably Walburga; next, the shell on the pilgrim's hat is the attribute of Saint James; then comes an unidentified saint (one of the five "Virgines capitales", probably), a monk (Willibald?), a saint (Wunibald) and two bishops, each holding a book in his left hand; in the absence of other elements, we assume that one the bishops is Saint Nicholas and the other is Saint Servatius, so that two local patron saints, Walpurga and Servatius are placed on each side of the Virgin.

We conclude that the iconography of the two liturgical objects belonging to the Cisnadie treasure comprises a few of the most popular Transylvanian saints, and also a group of local saints, who accompanied the Saxon settlers on the long journey from their places of origin. The two *Missales*, from Cisnadie and Sibiu, are identical with

the liturgical books found in the localities situated on the route followed by the colonists on their way to Transylvania: they contain the same orations. The depiction of these saints on the two cultic objects, the fact that other communities had their own local patron saints, the technical and artistic details, lead us to believe that both the chalice and the reliquary-cross were commissioned especially for the Cisnadie parish church and were executed in Sibiu, by artisans who were already famous for their craftsmanship.

(English version by Prof. Alice Hategan)



Figure 1: Chalice, Cisnadie, evangelical church. Local workshop, Sibiu, first half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The National Brukenthal Museum, inv. no. T. 31/4752 (silver, cast, hammered, engraved, gilded; *Niello*; H. 18.6 cm; D. [of the opening] 10.2 cm, D. [of the base] 13 cm, W. 401g.) Exhibited in Budapest in 1913, and in Budapest and Luxemburg in 2006.



Figure 2. Reliquary-cross, Evangelical Church. Local workshop, Sibiu, approx. 1440 (front side). The National Brukenthal Museum, inv. no. T. 29/4749 (silver, cast, hammered, fretwork, gilded; enamel in the *Tiefschnittschmelzes* or *basse–taille* technique; 113 pearls, 4 crystallites, 1 ruby; H. 63 cm; B. [of the cross] 21.1 cm, D. [of the base]. 22.1 cm, W. 2975 g. The letters *i. n. r. i.* inscribed above the head of the crucified Jesus). Exhibited in Budapest in 1884, 1896, 1912, in Paris in 1900, and in Budapest and Luxemburg in 2006.



Figure 3: Detail on the foot of the reliquary-cross: Sf. Barbara.



Figure 4. Detail on the foot of the reliquary-cross: Sf. Walpurga.



Figure 5: Detail on the foot of the reliquary-cross: Sf. Servatius

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