

## LATE ANTIQUE JUG DECORATED WITH HUNTING SCENES FROM BUDAKALÁSZ

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*The jug decorated with hunting scenes, discovered in 1989 during the excavation of the 6th–7th century Avar cemetery in Budakalász is an outstanding relic of the Late Antique–Early Byzantine period from the Carpathian Basin.<sup>1</sup> The jug's one-time Avar owners may have obtained it as part of a war booty or as a diplomatic gift. Conforming to the Avar tradition, this remarkable vessel bearing the symbols and visual vocabulary of a culture foreign to the Avars, had probably contained food or drink offering for the deceased, provisions for his journey to the otherworld.*

The jug was produced by lost-wax casting. It was made from brass which gave it a golden hue and set off the silver and copper plate inlays. The vessel body is decorated with two sets of four hunting scenes in the Hellenistic tradition, arranged in two wide friezes framed by Lesbian wave patterns (*kymata*). Parallels to the form of the Budakalász jug can be found among the Early Byzantine jugs recovered from the early medieval graves of the Barbarian European nobility dating from the 6th–7th century AD. However, none of these is decorated with scenes in relief; if decorated at all, they are only adorned with engraved motifs.

The cycle of hunting scenes is made up of various compositions, none of which eclipses the others. The liveliness of the lion hunting scene in the upper frieze immediately draws our attention. A monstrous lion springs from behind a Mediterranean pine to attack a panic-stricken horseman, who draws his sword and holds it high while galloping.

The leopard hunting scene shows a horseman clad in a short tunic galloping to the right, shooting his arrows backwards at two leopards running in different directions, one of which turns to look at the hunter. The image of the mounted archer recalls the light cavalry tactics of the steppe. The figure of the mounted hunter shooting his arrows backwards became part of Early Byzantine art, as shown by its appearance on the large 5th-century mosaic of the *peristylum* of the imperial palace in Constantinople and on the mosaic of the House of the Triclinos in Apamea.



<sup>1</sup> In the collection of the Ferenczy Museum, Directorate of County Pest Museums, Szentendre. The jug is currently exhibited in the Hungarian National Museum.

Three of the eight scenes on the jug depict bear hunting, one of which also portraying the figure of a wounded hunter falling to the ground. Appearing among the scenes is the savage fight between a bear and a boar on a cliff and a leopard retreating into the cave underneath, recalling the hunting scene on the mosaics of Piazza Armerina in Sicily and on the *Megalopsychia* mosaic in Antioch. Tiger hunting was also a popular theme of late Antique art. The scenes depicting the combat between men and animals on the Budakalász jug are not coherent parts of a hunting story, but isolated compositions simply placed beside one another in the so-called carpet rug style.



The resemblance between the Budakalász jug and other relics of court art suggest that it was produced in one of the prominent workshops of the East Roman Empire, perhaps in Constantinople or Antioch, in the late 5th or early 6th century.

The portrayal of hunting was a popular theme in the Late Roman and Early Byzantine period, appearing on the mosaics and frescoes adorning villas, palaces and churches, as well as in private and public buildings. Hunting scenes were often applied in toreutics and in the minor arts. The depiction of hunting became fashionable during Late Antiquity because it was a reflection on the lifestyle of the customer, a visual indication that the owner was a wealthy person who passed his time with hunting or could afford to organize expensive animal fights (*venatio*) in circuses.

The figure of the hunter was a suitable medium for symbolising man, who by virtue of his cunning, strength and intelligence achieves victory. Hunting scenes also became part of the religious imagery of early Christianity, as shown by the mosaic decorated dome of the Centelles mausoleum from the 4th century. Depictions of hunting were also popular themes on the personal articles not only of the nobility, but also of other social groups. The figure of the successful hunter was a source of inspiration to all. Hunting, as a symbol of good luck, became a widespread decorative element on buildings, churches and a wide array of other artefacts such as metal vessels, jewellery and buckles in Late Antiquity.