

UNDER THE SPELL OF SILVER – THE SEUSO TREASURE

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The Seuso Treasure is one of the most significant late Roman silver treasure finds. The find is made up of at least fourteen magnificent silver objects made in the 4th century A.D. and the copper cauldron used to hide them (Fig. 1).¹ Its name comes from the owner, Seuso, named in the metric inscription on one of the platters.² The pieces are typical parts of a set for a festive banquet, including vessels used for washing and beauty treatments. However, the currently known pieces of the treasure do not nearly make up the entire set. On the basis of similar silver finds and banquet scenes depicted in wall paintings and mosaics there may have been other pieces (a stand, smaller tableware vessels, eating utensils and cups) belonging to the set. Its owner probably hid it in the last decades of the 4th century, presumably while fleeing from an unexpected “barbarian” attack. In the final centuries of the Roman Empire other silver treasure hoards were hidden underground in various parts of the empire under similar circumstances.



*Fig. 1: The 14 silver vessels and the copper cauldron of the Seuso Treasure
(after Mundel Mango, Marlia: *Der Seuso-Schatzfund*. *Antike Welt* 21 [1990], 70, Fig. 1.)*

¹ For a detailed description of the Seuso Treasure see: Mundell Mango, Marlia – Bennett, Anna: *The Seuso Treasure, Part I*. *Journal of Roman Archaeology, Supplementary Series N. 12 part 1*. (Ann Arbor, MI: JRA, 1994).

² Mundel Mango, Marlia: *The Seuso Treasure Hunting Platter*. *Apollo* (1990)/July, 2–13.

The provenance of the Seuso Treasure is unclear to this day. Several data indicate that the silver set was used and hidden somewhere around Lake Balaton during the late imperial period.³ This is suggested by the Pelso inscription that can be read next to a body of water with abundant fish on one of the platters. Pelso was the Roman period Latin name of Lake Balaton (*Fig. 2*).

In addition, we know of a hoard made up of late Roman silver vessels found in the 1970s near the lake, in the vicinity of Polgárdi, which later disappeared. It was a young man who found this hoard, but his “luck” cost him his life. Whether the treasure hoard he found is the same as the Seuso Treasure can be considered quite probable, but this can only be confirmed through the scholarly research and police investigations that have been given renewed impetus.

In March of 2014 Hungary acquired eight pieces of the treasure. The news received huge coverage by the press; the newspaper writers and reporters dubbed the value and significance of the treasure with epithets such as “unmatched”, “the greatest” and “priceless”. However, from the articles and reports it did not come to light what was behind these words and how the set could be categorized on the basis of its value amongst other treasure troves.

THE PLACE OF THE SEUSO TREASURE AMONGST OTHER LATE ROMAN TREASURE TROVES

The Seuso Treasure is made up of two flat, large platters for serving food (the so-called Hunting Platter and the Geometric Platter), two other serving platters probably also used as ornamental platters (the so-called Achilles and Meleager platters), a basin probably used for washing the hands and face and two accompanying ewers with geometric designs, along with three ewers, one depicting Dionysus (*Fig. 3*), one with animal figures and one decorated with scenes from Greek mythology (the latter is the so-called Hyppolytus Ewer). It also includes two buckets (*situlae*) with decoration related to the Hippolytus Ewer, a casket for storing



Fig. 2: The Roman period Latin name for Lake Balaton (Pelso) in the medallion of the so-called Hunting Platter (photograph: Zsolt Mráv)



Fig. 3: Detail of the Dionysiac Ewer of the Seuso Treasure (photograph: László Mátyus)

³ Nagy, Mihály – Tóth, Endre: The Seuso Treasure. The Pannonian Connection? *Minerva* 1 (1990)/7, 5–11; Tóth, Endre: A Seuso-kincs: egy észak-pannoniai ezüstkincs / The Seuso treasure: a silver hoard from Northern Pannonia. In: *A Seuso-kincs és Pannonia. Magyarországi tanulmányok a Seuso-kincsről I. / The Seuso treasure and Pannonia. Scientific Contributions to the Seuso Treasure from Hungary I*, ed. Visy, Zsolt – Mráv, Zsolt (Pécs: Genianet, 2012), 64–79.



Fig. 4: The Toilet Casket from the Seuso Treasure
(photograph: László Mátyus)



Fig. 5: The pieces of the Seuso Treasure that have arrived
in Hungary (photograph: Marianna Dági, the cauldron: László Mátyus)

perfume flasks (Fig. 4) and an amphora. These vessels were probably hidden in a large copper cauldron. In March of 2014 the Hunting and Geometric platters, the two geometric ewers, the washing basin, the toilet casket, the Dionysiac Ewer and the copper cauldron arrived in Hungary (Fig. 5).⁴

Richard Hobbs, the curator of the British Museum has worked out a method of calculating an objective order of value for late imperial treasure finds made up of various objects.⁵ Taking into account the comparative values of silver and gold provided in contemporary written sources and the converted ratio of precious metal in the finds of varying compositions he determined their *Equivalent Gold Weight*. With the aid of this method of calculation Hobbs made a Top 10 list for the over 1,800 treasure hoards that can be dated between the end of the 2nd to the end of the 7th centuries A.D. and are linked to the Roman Empire and its Byzantine successor state.⁶ Into this inventory he entered treasure troves containing not only silver vessels, but also coins and jewellery. A find from Paris-Rue Clovis comprised of 1,200 *aurei* and dated to the beginning of the 3rd century took first place, with an equivalent gold weight of 8.521 kg.⁷ With an equivalent gold weight of 4.567 kg the Seuso Treasure, in its currently known quite incomplete state, still landed up with the distinction of sixth place. However, in his ranking Hobbs did not include the Polgárdi

⁴ Mráv, Zsolt – Dági, Marianna: A Seuso kincs – régész szemmel (The Seuso Treasure – Through the Eyes of an Archaeologist). *Artmagazin* 12 (2014)/3, 6–13.

⁵ Hobbs, Richard: *Late Roman Precious Metal Deposits c. AD 200-700. Changes over time and space* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2006), 17–24.

⁶ Hobbs, Richard: Mine's Bigger than Yours: Comparing Values of Late Roman Hoards. In: *Roman Finds: Context and Theory. Proceedings of a Conference Held at the University of Durham*, ed. Hingley, Richard – Willis, Steven (Oxbow: Oxbow books, 2007), 83–84.

⁷ Blanchet, A.: *Les trésors de monnaies romaines et les invasions germaniques de la Gaule*. (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1900), no. 327.



Fig. 6: The folding silver stand found in 1878 in the village of Kőszárhegy next to Polgárdi, with a copy of the so-called Hunting Platter from the Seuso Treasure (photograph: András Dabasi)



Fig. 7: Detail of the Polgárdi silver stand depicting a sea griffin (photograph: András Dabasi)

stand, which based on it coming from the same site, being of the same age and the same artistic quality may have once been a part of the Seuso Treasure (Figs 6–7).⁸ The value of the stand made from 20 kg of silver was somewhere over 1.33 kg of gold, which added to the Seuso Treasure gives us 5.9 kg of gold. However, this data is only for the currently known pieces of the Seuso Treasure, and only for their silver content, not for their artistic value.

If we examine the Seuso Treasure in connection with finds of similar type and composition, that is late Roman silver serving and toiletry sets, it then stands in third place (Table 1). So, we only know of a single treasure trove consisting of silver vessels larger than the Seuso Treasure, but it has not survived. What is still to this day considered the largest late imperial period treasure was found in 1628 in the city of Trier, Germany during the construction of a Jesuit monastery.⁹ The full weight of this banquet set was over 114 kg, and it contained over 50 pieces made of silver (Fig. 8). However, the hoard was melted down at that time following its careful description. Second place is held by the collection containing objects made of precious metals found next to Hoxne in England,¹⁰ whose full weight can be placed at 27.7 kg. While the equivalent gold weight of this find is significantly greater than that of the Seuso Treasure, due to its composition it is not truly comparable. The majority of this treasure made up of more than 15,000 pieces is made up of silver

⁸ For this in summary, see: Mráv, Zsolt: The silver folding stand from Polgárdi and the Seuso treasure / A polgárdi összecsukható ezüstállvány és a Seuso-kincs. In: *A Seuso-kincs és Pannonia. Magyarországi tanulmányok a Seuso-kincsről I. / The Seuso Treasure and Pannonia. Scientific Contributions to the Seuso Treasure from Hungary I*, ed. Visy, Zsolt – Mráv, Zsolt (Pécs: Genianet, 2012), 80–106.

⁹ Binsfeld, Wolfgang: Der 1628 in Trier gefundene römische Silberschatz. *Trierer Zeitschrift* 42 (1979), 113–127.

¹⁰ Johns, Catherine: *The Hoxne Late Roman Treasure. Gold Jewellery and Silver Platter* (London: The Trustees of the British Museum, 2014).

	The name and location of the treasure	The weight of the silver objects	Number	Equivalent Gold Weight (EGW)	Date when hidden
1.	Trier (Germany) – 1628	114.5 kg	49 (+ 1 piece [Ewer] ? found in 1926)	7.625 kg	second half of the 4 th century
2.	Hoxne (England) – 1992	23.83 kg (of this the silver objects: 5.81 kg, the rest are coins)	20 silver vessels, 111 spoons, ladles and toothpicks (alongside coins and gold jewellery)	5.234 kg	end of the 4 th century/beginning of the 5 th century
3.	The Seuso Treasure (probably in the vicinity of Polgárdi or Szabadbattyán, Hungary) – middle of the 1970s	68.5 kg, 88.5 kg with the Polgárdi stand	Full number unknown (possibly between about 40 and 250 pieces)	4.567 kg (together with the Polgárdi stand about 6 kg)	last third of the 4 th century
4.	Kaiseraugst (Switzerland) – winter of 1961–62	61.5 kg	85 silver objects	4.064 kg	ca. 350
5.	Cibalae (Vinkovci, Croatia) – 2012	about 30 kg	48 pieces	about 2 kg	middle of the 4 th century?
6.	Rome, Esquilinus (Italy) – 1793	27.37 kg	61 pieces	1.82 (or 2.83) kg	end of the 4 th century/beginning of the 5 th century
7.	Mildenhall III (England) – 1942	26 kg	34 pieces	1.735 kg (320 solidi)	end of the 4 th century/beginning of the 5 th century
8.	Traprain Law (Scotland) – 1919	21.83 kg	160 fragments + broken silver objects	1.45 kg	end of the 4 th century/beginning of the 5 th century

Table 1: Ranking based on weight of treasure finds containing late Roman silver objects and banquet sets found in the territory of the Roman Empire

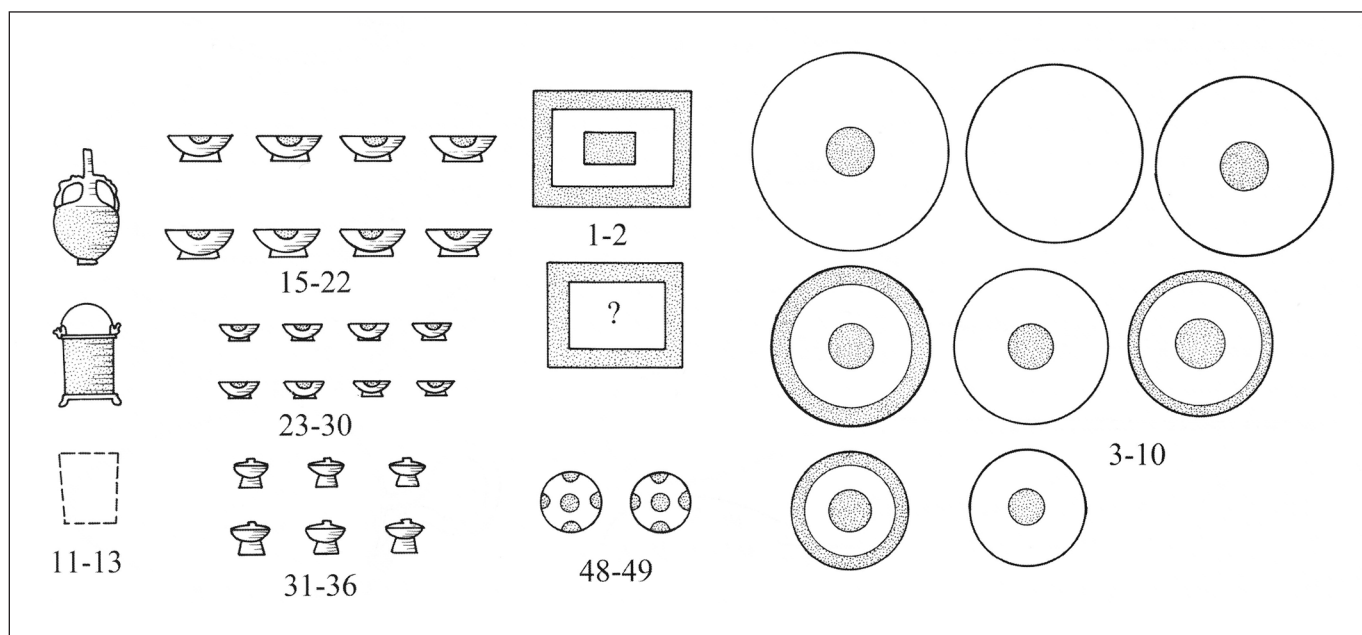


Fig. 8: The reconstructions of the silver vessels from the Trier Treasure based on descriptions (after Martin, Max: *The Traprain objects before hacking*. In: *Late Roman Silver. The Traprain Treasure in Context*, ed. Painter, Kenneth – Hunter, Fraser [Edinburgh: Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, 2013], 264, Fig. 16.2)

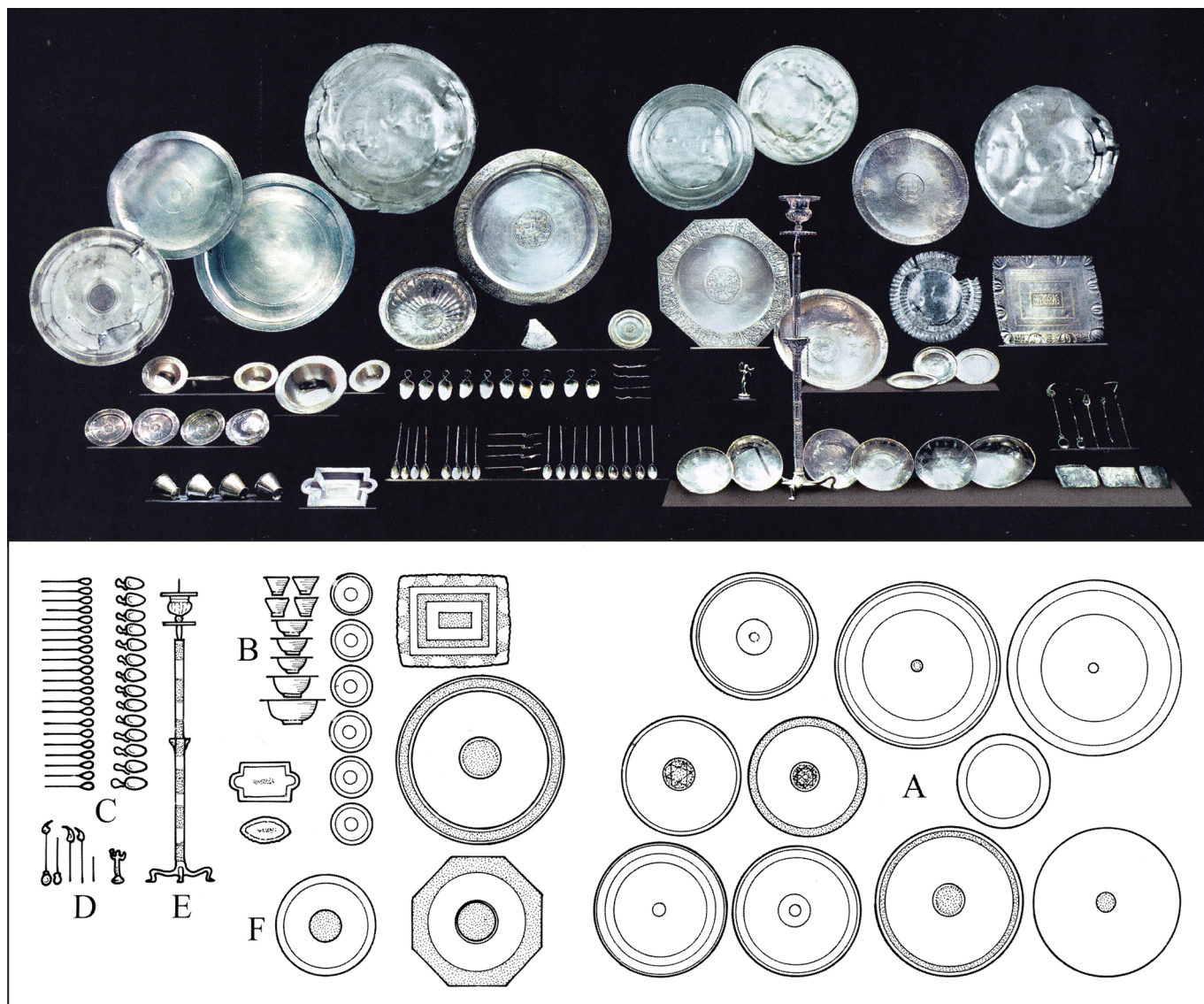


Fig. 9: The Kaiseraugst Treasure (after Martin, Max: *The Traprain objects before hacking*. In: *Late Roman Silver. The Traprain Treasure in Context*, ed. Painter, Kenneth – Hunter, Fraser [Edinburgh: Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, 2013], 264, Fig. 16.1)

and gold coins, and it is accompanied by “only” 148 silver objects of tableware and toiletries, as well as gold jewellery, whose weight is 6.8 kg. Right after the Seuso Treasure in fourth place is the silver tableware set bulldozed out of the Roman fort (*castellum Rauriacense*) in Kaiseraugst, Switzerland at the beginning of the 1960s, which with its weight of over 61 kg is just under that of the currently known objects of the Seuso Treasure, but is comprised of a far greater number of pieces, 85 in total (Fig. 9).¹¹

“The Seuso Treasure is the most valuable archaeological find that has ever come from the current territory of Hungary” is what one Hungarian weekly paper wrote. This statement has a genuine basis in truth, to the extent that the scientific examinations that will be soon conducted confirm the treasure’s Hungarian provenance. This is particularly true if we consider the find’s presumed original size, which may have been as great as 100–150 kg.¹² However, there is a Hungarian find – the so-called “find of the millennium” hoard

¹¹ Cahn, Herbert A. – Kaufmann-Heinimann, Annemarie (Hrsg.): *Der spätrömische Silberschatz von Kaiseraugst*. Basler Beiträge zur Ur- und Frühgeschichte Bd. 9. (Augst: Stiftung Pro Augusta Raurica, 1984); Guggisberg, Martin A. (Hrsg.): *Der spätrömische Silberschatz von Kaiseraugst. Die neuen Funde*. Forschungen in Augst Bd. 34 (Augst: Römerstadt Augusta Raurica, 2004).

¹² For the original number of pieces belonging to the Seuso Treasure, see: Ruiz, Christina: The silver missing from the Sevso hoard. *Art Newspaper* (2007)/ March, 1 and 4; Ruiz, Christina: The missing plate from the Sevso hoard. *Art Newspaper* (2007)/April, 6.

	The name and location of the treasure	The weight of the silver objects	Number	Equivalent Gold Weight (EGW)	Date when hidden
1.	The Seuso Treasure (probably in the vicinity of Polgárdi or Szabadbattyán, Hungary) – middle of the 1970s	68.5 kg, 88.5 kg with the Polgárdi stand	Full number unknown (possibly between about 40 and 250 pieces)	4.567 kg (together with the Polgárdi stand about 6 kg)	last third of the 4 th century
2.	Cibalae (Vinkovci, Croatia) – 2012	about 30 kg	48 pieces	about 2 kg	middle of the 4 th century?
3.	Šabacs (Serbia) – 1908	6.752 kg	3 pieces	0.45 kg	first half/middle of the 4 th century
4.	Siscia (Sisak, Croatia) – 1953	no data on weight published	5 pieces + coins	0.282 kg	ca. 295–296
5.	Petrijanec (Croatia) – 2005	3.28 kg (3 silver plates)	3 pieces + 27.735 Antoniniani	0.218 kg	294 or directly afterwards
6.	Carnuntum, military camp (Austria) – 1976	no data on weight published	7 pieces	?	first decades of the 4 th century
7.	Siscia (Sisak, Croatia)	1.303 kg	1 piece (ewer)	0.086 kg	end of the 4 th century/ beginning of the 5 th century
8.	Aquincum (Budapest, Hungary)	1.016 kg	1 piece (ewer)	0.067 kg	4 th century
9.	Aquincum (Budapest, Hungary), Kapucinus Hill – 1884	0.985 kg	1 piece (ewer)	0.065 kg	end of the 4 th century/ 5 th century
10.	Solva (Esztergom, Hungary) – 1901	0.635 kg	2 pieces (semispherical bowl)	0.042 kg	first third of the 4 th century

Table 2: Ranking based on weight of treasure finds containing late Roman silver objects and banquet sets found in the Pannonian provinces

of coins made up of 1439 *solidi*¹³ – that has a slightly higher equivalent gold weight (6.404 kg) than the combined equivalent gold weight of the 14 currently known silver vessels and the Polgárdi stand (about 6 kg). This find, the 50th anniversary of whose discovery we just celebrated recently, is actually a legacy of the Hun era, with its origin possibly being from the annual peace tribute paid by the Roman Empire to the Huns.

If we try to assess the Seuso Treasure in comparison with treasure troves discovered within the territory of the Pannonian provinces, its top rank is indisputable (Table 2). Similarly opulent late Roman silver finds had long been lacking from Pannonia. Those who disputed the Hungarian provenance of the Seuso Treasure exploited this, stressing that due to the lack of treasure troves like this it could not have been from this area. This argument was refuted in 2012 by the late Roman silver set discovered at Cibalae in southeastern Pannonia (present-day Vinkovci, Croatia), which contained silver objects from a banquet and toiletry set similar to the Seuso Treasure, but less significant in terms of artistic value and weight.¹⁴ This find of at least 48 objects with a weight of 30 kg in itself proves that the social class that owned and used tableware serving sets this opulent existed in late imperial period Pannonia.

¹³ Bíró-Sey Katalin: A szikáncsi V. századi solidus lelet. *Numizmatikai Közlemények* 74–75 (1975–1976), 7–19.

¹⁴ For the Vinkovci silver set, for the present see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vinkovci_Treasure. [24 April 2014].

THE VALUE OF THE SEUSO TREASURE IN ITS OWN TIME

We know that the English possessors of the treasure recently wanted to put the Seuso silver up for auction in 2006 at a price equal to about 186 million U.S. dollars at the current exchange rate, and certainly expected it to go for a much greater amount than that. This number would have been the treasure's minimum "market price", if of course it had remained legal to sell. For a researcher, a much more interesting question is how much the silver objects of the Seuso Treasure would have been worth in their own time. This would tell us a great deal about the financial status and social position of its ancient owner or owners.

Contemporary written sources report that the purchase prices of silver objects did not only include the value of the precious metal, but also an additional 10–50% was calculated for their artistic value. It is not surprising that the price of an undecorated or simply decorated silver vessel was hardly more than the value of the precious metal. However, the calculation of prices for masterpieces of the silversmith such as the objects of the Seuso Treasure was different. About half their value was for the material and the other half came from the work invested by the silversmith.¹⁵ Nevertheless, it is not certain that every piece of the treasure is of this quality – for example the Geometric Platter and the wash basin were more sparsely and simply decorated. We are probably not far from the truth if on the basis of this we reconstruct the full equivalent gold weight of the known pieces of the Seuso Treasure (including the Polgárdi stand as well) at 12 kg, from which they would have been able to mint 2,700 *solidi* (typical gold coins weighing 4.48 g in the 4th–5th centuries A.D.).

The value of this amount can be truly illustrated if we compare it to the annual salaries of a few state positions in the late imperial period. In the imperial administration of the time a lower ranking clerk earned 9 *solidi*, which was the same as the annual service pay of a mounted soldier. The highest salary of a state official can be placed at 46 *solidi*, but only a few leading imperial bureaucrats were awarded this much. Therefore, it would have taken an average official no less than 300 years and someone in a leading position 58 years to earn enough for the silver vessels of the Seuso Treasure, or half this time for their raw materials. At the same time it was possible to purchase for a single *solidus* a soldier's cloak,¹⁶ 350 liters of wheat, 88 kg of beef or 109 liters of wine.¹⁷ Although, from a large estate that on average would yield an annual income of 1,500 *solidi* the price of this kind of silver banquet set could have been produced in just a few years. The richest patrician families of the city of Rome had annual revenues of over a quarter of a million *solidi*,¹⁸ which in comparison dwarfs the value of the Seuso silver objects. It is likely that the families making up the leading imperial elite used gold tableware such as are known from the Pietroasa site within the territory of Romania.¹⁹ So, in addition to the emperor, the members of this social class would have been able to make gifts of premium quality silverware amongst themselves and for families with whom they wanted to cultivate friendly relations.²⁰

For the above calculations we were only able to take into account the value of the currently known objects of the Seuso Treasure. We must keep in mind, however, the fact that these numbers presumably only relate to a half or a third of the full original set, so the former full value of the Seuso Treasure may have been double or triple our final figure. Our calculations also clearly show that with the arrival of one part of the Seuso Treasure, Hungary has come into possession of a Roman-period hoard that can be considered amongst our artistic masterpieces that have the most significant value and the greatest ability to attract tourists.

¹⁵ Painter, Kenneth: Late Roman silver platter: a reply to Alan Cameron. *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 6 (1993), 113.

¹⁶ *Codex Theodosianus* VII,6,4 (396) = *Codex Iustinianus* XII,39,3.

¹⁷ *Novellae Valentiniani* XIII: 4 (445).

¹⁸ Fig. 44 in: Mueller, C. ed., *Fragmenta historicorum Graecorum*, IV, 67 – cf. Stein, Ernst: *Geschichte des spätrömischen Reiches*. Bd. I. (Wien: Verlag von L. W. Seidel & Sohn, 1928), 504.

¹⁹ Dunăreanu-Vulpe, Ecaterina: *Tezaurul de la Pietroasa*. (București: Editura Meridiane, 1967).

²⁰ Guggisberg, Martin A.: Silver and donatives: non-coin exchange within and outside the Roman empire. In: *Late Roman Silver: The Traprain Treasure in Context*, ed. Painter, Kenneth – Hunter, Fraser (Edinburgh: Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, 2013), 193–212.

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