

A SPECIAL EXHIBIT FROM BAIJA MARE DATED 1608, AN OCCASION FOR A CONCISE FRESCO OF THE TOWN AT THAT TIME

Abstract: The piece presented is a casting mould for unleavened bread, a massive and interesting wrought-iron piece made by the blacksmiths and engravers of Baia Mare.

The engravings of the two plates of the mould are described and explained. On the first one, there are engraved and richly decorated the Crucifixion and the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the New Testament. On the second plate, there are engraved the year 1608 and the crossed hammers – the symbol of mining.

The piece we are talking about is kept in the collections of the History and Archaeology Museum of Baia Mare. It is important due to the artistic value of the engravings, its date and the Christian message it has conveyed for more than four centuries.

Keywords: mould, unleavened bread, crafts, town, conflicts, museum

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The item under consideration here is a mould for unleavened bread or host, dating back over 400 years and preserved in the collections of the History and Archaeology Museum of Baia Mare.

Sacramental wafer or host is the unleavened bread used in the ritual of communion and it represents, in a Christian and, in this case, in a Catholic sense, the body of Jesus and His sacrifice for the redemption of mankind's sins.

The artifact under discussion, the product of craftsmen-artists from Baia Mare, illustrates, at least in part, the spiritual and cultural life of this old town at the time. Given the circumstances in which it was made and used, the mould, dated 1608, also reflects, we believe, some political and social aspects of that time. We will try to discern these aspects because this item, which has the value of a historical document, gives us the opportunity, impelling us almost, to sketch a brief outline of the town of Baia Mare in and around the aforementioned year.

The mould and its destination

Through its less common shape and size, this object retains attention and even arouses curiosity, the first impression being that of an unusual pair of tongs (Fig.1). In fact, this was a mould used to bake sacramental wafer² – a loaf of unleavened dough that contained nothing but wheat flour and water. The shape of this product is flat and narrow, and the decoration and motifs that the mould imprinted convince us that this wafer was produced for important feast days.

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² Dorina Negulici, *Feronerie Braşoveană, sec. XV-XIX*, Braşov, 2003, pp. 72-76.

The piece, made of wrought iron, is massive, with a total length of 78 cm, and it consists of two rectangular plates, with the size of 21.5 x 13.5 cm. The plates, extended each with a grip handle that is 57 cm long, come together much like the arms of a pair of tongs. The handles are articulated with the help of a threaded rod with a bolt nut and a protruding handle, with beautiful arched ends allowing the necessary space for placing and pressing the dough and, respectively, for imprinting the decoration. It may be assumed that the two long handles ended with a sleeve made of wood (which has not been preserved), intended to protect the hands when the mould was held into the fire for the dough to bake.

Regarding its conservation status, the piece presents the traces of a long corrosion process, which has nonetheless been halted and whose effects have been removed by restoration and conservation in the laboratory of the History and Archaeology County Museum of Baia Mare.

Metal engraving with biblical representations

The faces of the plates are engraved (Fig.2), the composition of one of them defining the mould as one that was used for imprinting unleavened bread, specially prepared primarily for the Christian celebration of the Resurrection (Easter).³

The rich front decoration of the first plate consists of two successive plans, each inscribed within two concentric circles, of which the exterior ones are decorated with laurel leaves. Inside the circles are depicted scenes of the Crucifixion and, respectively, the Resurrection (Fig. 3). The highly stylised and very expressive figures are rendered with delicacy and piety by the engraver.

In the first scene, crucified Jesus is rendered schematically, as if what has been left, in the wake of suffering, is just an idea, the idea of supreme sacrifice, which he took upon Himself for the salvation of mankind. Moreover, Mary, the mother of Jesus, and John (the Apostle John) are on either side of the cross, on their knees, lamenting for Him. The scene expresses the heart-breaking suffering of the mother for her Son, the desire to alleviate His pain and, yet, her helplessness in the face of a great destiny. It expresses, at the same time, the sadness of a man who was near to and worshipped Jesus, His disciple, to whose care the Saviour entrusted His own mother, uttering from the cross: "Woman, behold your son!" (John 19:26). On the bar above the cross of Crucifixion: INPI, that is, the inscription ordered by Pontius Pilate: *Iezus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum* (P, probably, from the Greek alphabet, corresponding to the letter R in the Latin alphabet).

In the second plan, respectively, in the second scene, Jesus is depicted in motion, as if he were floating. A scarf that starts from the bust, slightly fluttering to His right, also suggests this soaring. In the left hand, He is holding a cross that is stylised, like the entire composition, with pole resting on the ground in front of the tomb and having a phylactery on top. The cover of the rectangular tomb is moved to the left to make room for the exit. What dominates the scene is the feeling of victory over death, over darkness, and the message conveyed is that of joy, of hope, of an uplifting spiritual experience.

³ Viorica Ursu, "Mesaj de Paște de acum patru veacuri," in *Graiul Maramureșului*, Baia Mare, year VIII, no. 1871, 13 April 1996.

The decoration of the wafer mould plate that we have just described is completed by two laurel twigs placed one under each circle. This, in turn, closes each of the two plans. There are also two small circles circumscribing a decorative motif in the shape of a Greek cross adorned with laurel leaves. The crosses adorned thus are placed between the two plans and complete the decoration of the mould's first plate. Everything is placed within a frame made of two engraved lines and having a rectangular shape, with bevelled corners. It is easy to see the difference between, on the one hand, the touching and convincing artistic composition of the engraving on the plate and, on the other hand, that of the decoration consisting of mathematically drawn circles and lines, adorned with naturally rendered leaves.

The craftsmen of the mould and the trades represented thereupon

The front of the second mould plate is engraved with a coat of arms, a shield enclosed within a frame of successively drawn lines, within which there are capital letters representing, of course, the initials of the names of people and, also, the figures of the year in which the mould was made: M G A(nno) 1608 (Figure 4). This year has, perhaps, a significance that we will try to grasp intuitively. In the next row, the initials I M circumscribe two crossed hammers – a mining symbol. Underneath them are the last initials: P E.

It is difficult to reconstruct the names of the persons represented through these initials. We may assume that the first initials belonged to a local church official, who will have commissioned the piece. The following, however, could be, we believe, the initials of the blacksmith who executed the mould, while those in the third row belonged to the master engraver (the artist, we might say) to whom the composition belonged. The engraver, who turns out to have been so refined in depicting the characters, also mastered technical drawing, using the compasses and the ruler in achieving the circles and the lines that decorate the plates of the mould.

A few words about the crafts of Baia Mare illustrated by the mould of 1608 are, perhaps, necessary. Because the unleavened wafers – unlike the host commonly prepared in the priest's house – were kneaded and baked by the bakers or bread-makers, these craftsmen were always respected in town and were often part of its leadership.⁴ As for the blacksmiths in Baia Mare, whose guild was the oldest here, we know that they produced a wide variety of object, but mainly tools, including those required by other trades, hence, also scissors and tongs, which the piece under consideration in this study resembled.⁵ About the engravers from Baia Mare, we should say that they were part of the monetary craftsmen employed by the mint; together with the coins modellers and the founders, they made moulds of brass or iron.⁶ Their work involved not only skill, but art. (Thus, the gold medal struck in the mint from Baia Mare, eight years before, in 1600, in honour of Michael the Brave,

⁴ Ștefan Pascu, *Meșteșugurile în Transilvania până în sec. al XVI-lea*, București, 1954, p. 106; Gheorghe Csoma „...Suprema tărie a orașului.” *Istoria orașului Baia Mare de la începuturi până la unirea din 1918*, Baia Mare, 1999, p. 137.

⁵ *Monografia municipiului Baia Mare* (hereinafter, *Monografia Baia Mare*), 1973, vol. I, p. 167.

⁶ Ioan Sabău, “Monetăria din Baia Mare în secolele XV-XVII,” in *Marmața*, 3, Baia Mare, 1978, p. 64.

had been the work of artisans like these).⁷ One of them will have engraved the plates of the mould we are examining here, for the stylisation of the figures on the plate of the mould is similar to that of the coins minted in town during those years.

Baia Mare in 1608

The year engraved by the authors of the mould on one of the plates – which enhances its historical and museum value – enables us to conclude that no less four centuries separate us from those artists-craftsmen and the time in which they lived and celebrated the “Lord’s Resurrection”! Much to people, not so much for the history of the town of Baia Mare. We believe it necessary to devote the following few lines to this subject because the object under analysis bears, besides the figures of the year 1608, the symbol of mining. We have no doubt, therefore, that the mould was made and used in Baia Mare and that this item has been preserved here, throughout all these four centuries.

The town, which used to call itself (still) also “Rivulus Dominarum,” using the little seal since the year 1483, had its important place in the history of the autonomous Principality of Transylvania.⁸ It was, at that time too, in 1608, a free town, independent of the county administration and of the nobles. It was led by a magistrate, headed by the mayor judge, and had a separate administration from that of the “Chamber” (the administration of the revenue authority’s property).⁹ It had maintained the old rights of trial since the 14th century, which provided, for crimes considered serious at that time, some of the most terrible punishments. The town received several privileges, conferred to it successively and completed throughout time, some dating from a period close to the one we are focusing on – 1608, these privileges having been granted or extended by the Princes of Transylvania.¹⁰

In spring 1608, the throne of the Principality was occupied by Gabriel Bathory (until 1613). This prince, who was well-nigh tolerant in religious matters, but was sufficiently challenged in history because of his lack of tact in foreign policy,¹¹ was aware of and interested in the revenue that the town of Baia Mare could bring him. Thus, he added it new facilities and exemptions, supporting the activity of mining here and of the mint that became, thus, the most important in Transylvania.¹²

⁷ Ștefan D. Tănăsescu, “Despre medalia lui Mihai Viteazul,” in *Buletinul Societății Numismatice Române*, XVII-XIX, București, 1975, p. 242.

⁸ Ioan Nemeti, “Scurt istoric al sigiliului orașului Baia Mare,” in *Marmația*, I/1967, p. 20; Viorica Ursu, “Centenarul unei descoperiri deosebite la Baia Mare” (the town seal, silver print, 14th century), in *Graiul Maramureșului*, no. 4460, Baia Mare, 27-28 November 2004.

⁹ *Monografia Baia Mare*, p. 205.

¹⁰ In 1605, by Șt. Bocskay (1604-1606), in 1607 by Sigismund Rakóczy (1607-1608), in 1609 and 1612 by Gabriel Báthory.

¹¹ He was considered “cruel and reckless” (in fact, he was the grandson of the terrifying Bathory Erzsébeth, albeit he was unrelated to the murders that she was associated with). The Saxons, above all, judged him harshly, but he had made plenty of enemies. For other considerations about this much too ambitious prince, see M. Diaconescu, “Din istoria Maramureșului în timpul principelui Gabriel Bathory,” in *Satu Mare-Studii și Comunicări*, XV-XVI, 1998-1999.

¹² Sabău, *op. cit.*, pp. 60 and 65; Eugen Chirilă, Octavian Bandula, *Tezaurul monetar de la Baia Mare*, Baia Mare, 1966, p. 106.

The town was recovering after difficult years, marked by the harsh Austrian rule, by wars and conflicts. Its economy experienced, however, a gradual revival, particularly as a consequence of increased production of precious metals. In this sense, the revenue authority owned the most important mine in the city, the one from Dealul Crucii, and an estate that included the villages around Baia Mare. Also, as regards the mint, it worked intensely, producing, during the period of Gabriel Bathory's principality, very expensive coins – gold ducats and silver thalers.¹³ The increase in handicraft production and its growing diversity during these years, as well as throughout the 17th century, was notable and the craftsmanship of the artisans from Baia Mare is also attested by the piece we are dealing with in the present study. Among the craftsmen, those who were rich and influential in town were: the goldsmiths and the silversmiths, who also marked with crossed hammers their works and who were famous far into Europe; the butchers, the tailors, the coopers, the potters, the furriers, the carpenters etc., all of them having ancient and powerful guilds.¹⁴ The town's economy also relied on agriculture, especially on the production and sale of wine, and in 1606, the town's brewery also started contributing with taxes.¹⁵ This whole state of affairs was reflected in the trade. The weekly market was held in Circulus Fori. The central area of the town and of the fortress was one of the sectors in which the town had been divided four years earlier (in 1604), regarding the census levy.¹⁶

As for the constructions, we should first mention that the town actually had the appearance of a fortress – it was surrounded by walls, featuring four gateways and guarded by towers. Inside the fortifications, around the already mentioned central area, there were buildings from the previous centuries or erected just during the period we have talked about (the beginning of the 17th century), partially changed at a later time, but preserved until today. The most important building was the St. Stephen's Church, built almost two centuries earlier, with its symbolic tower, one century younger than it. The church was Catholic until about 1588, when it became Protestant, Calvinist – as did most of the townspeople – and when all its statues and pictures were removed, as unacceptable by the new religion.¹⁷ Being constantly disputed by the two religious denominations, which were then involved in a bitter conflict, the imposing building was to pass from one hand to another five more times before the occupation of Transylvania by the Habsburg Empire, in 1685. (In the next century, the Austrian authorities changed the confessional rapport in town, Catholicism regaining much of the ground it had lost in Baia Mare).¹⁸

¹³ Sabău, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

¹⁴ Viorica Ursu, "Capodopere ale breslei olarilor din Baia Mare," in *Marmația*, 5-6, Baia Mare, 1979, p. 194; Csoma, *op. cit.* p. 127 and passim; Viorica Ursu, "Meșteșug și artă la Baia Mare - tradiții seculare," in *Graiul Maramureșului*, year no. 2318, Baia Mare, 22-23 November 1997.

¹⁵ *Monografia Baia Mare*, pp. 294-295 and 304.

¹⁶ *Idem*, pp. 227, 228.

¹⁷ Csoma, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

¹⁸ The Catholics will managed to build in Baia Mare, between 1718-1720, the beautiful cathedral "The Holy Trinity," but this happened about 160 years after the Reformation had been imposed.

The general note of relative economic prosperity in the town of Baia Mare, which emerges from the data concerning the year 1608 and its proximate years as well, is supported by the accumulation of the gold treasure discovered here in 1965.¹⁹ The 987 pieces it contains date precisely from the years 1604-1614, and 209 of these are the gold ducats issued by the aforementioned Prince Gabriel Bathory in 1608.²⁰ The treasure may not have been the only treasure collected by a townsman. Its burial and, perhaps, the hiding of other such treasures denote the uncertainty of the times, the far too many ordeals Baia Mare and its surroundings went through, in the early years of 17th century. But let us focus a little on this aspect of the town's life.

Baia Mare had felt the full brunt of the rivalry between the Ottoman Empire and the Habsburg Empire for dominance in the Principality, the conflicts having just been waged in the context of the anti-Ottoman "Long War" (13 years), begun by Michael the Brave and continued even after his death, until 1606, under the banner of the "Christian League."²¹ It overlapped with the religious conflict between the supporters of the Reformation, situated in the anti-Habsburg camp and under the influence of the Porte, on the one hand, and the Catholics, who had lost their supremacy in Transylvania over fifty years before and were supporting now the Counter-Reformation waged by the Habsburgs. Baia Mare barely escaped, with many sacrifices, from Austrian occupation and the abuses committed by General Basta, who had established his dominion over Maramureş and Sătmar. The rebellion of 1604-1605, led by the Protestant nobleman Şt. BacsKay, who had become prince (1604-1606), also provoked violence, abuses and inherent destruction, afflicting not only the besieged town of Baia Mare, but also, like in so many other occasions, the surrounding villages. This was the context in which the well-known Habra Monastery "above Baia Mare," near Groşi, was destroyed.²²

In 1608 – the year engraved on the plate of the mould we are analysing here – the brief reconciliation between the Calvinist and the imperial princes was only two years long (since 1606), having allowed the spirits that had been incensed for half a century to cool down. Thus, under a Catholic prince this time, Gabriel Bathory, just installed at the helm of Transylvania in March 1608, on the eve of the great Christian holiday of Easter, there could be imprinted and distribute here, in Baia Mare, the insignia of the Crucifixion and the Resurrection – a true iconography that was, however, not admitted by the Reformed denomination. We believe that this special support – an easily acceptable product, unleavened bread – was chosen to "disseminate" a message of joy, that of the feast of the Resurrection. It was also envisaged to meet the need or the obstructed practice, like the Catholic processions, to present in images, in a unique manner, and to spread unto remembrance, Christian scenes evoked by the engravings of the mould and imprinted, with its help, in many copies. Perhaps this great celebration was honoured by the presence here of a

¹⁹ Chirilă, Bandula, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ *Istoria Românilor*, vol. IV, Bucureşti, 2001, p. 593 and *passim*.

²² Viorica Ursu, "În legătură cu memoriul din 1614 adresat autorităţilor imperiale austriece de românii din ţinutul Baia Mare, Chioar şi Sătmar," in *Marmaţia*, 5-6, Baia Mare, 1980, pp. 185-193.

Catholic prelate and this occasioned the “making” of the unleavened bread, so beautifully decorated, of a larger size and in a special format, compared to the host, as was common at Communion. Perhaps the installation of a Catholic prince on the throne of Transylvania was felt and hailed as a much desired “unchaining” for the Catholics in Baia Mare. This seems to be the explanation of the mould produced precisely at Easter in the year 1608.

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This outstanding artifact – the mould from Baia Mare, dated 1608 – which we have tried to make speak about itself, about Baia Mare, about the realities of the town during that period and about those times – thus proves to be a surprisingly complex piece, of wider historical interest than it might seem at first glance. Of course, its first significance is related to an important religious practice.

We should also note its importance for the museum, as the mould under discussion has been selected for several history exhibitions:

- The exhibition “Crafts of Baia Mare,” organised at the Butchers’ Tower in 1983, one of the exhibitions hosted by this monument after its museal rehabilitation and valorisation in the years 1980-1981.²³

- The exhibition “Peri Monastery – 600,” with old objects of worship and religious books (the first of its kind in Baia Mare), occasioned by the anniversary of 600 years since the attestation of the old monastery from Peri-Maramureș as a stauropegic monastery of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, an exhibition organised by the County Museum of Baia Mare in 1991.²⁴

- The inter-museal exhibition “Transylvanian Guilds (the 14th-19th centuries),” organised by the history museums in Tg. Mureș, Cluj-Napoca, Baia Mare, Bistrița, Zalău and itinerated in those cities in 1997 and 1998.

²³ Viorica Ursu, “Valorificarea muzeală a unui monument istoric băimărean,” in *Revista Muzeelor și Monumentelor*, Seria *Monumente istorice*, București, 1981, pp. 76-77; Viorica Ursu, Lucia Pop, “Manifestări științifice și culturale organizate de Muzeul de Istorie și Arheologie din Baia Mare în perioada 1980-2000,” in *Marmația* 7/2, Baia Mare, 2002, p. 29.

²⁴ Viorica Ursu, “Șase secole de atestare documentară a Mănăstirea ‘Sf. Mihail’ din Peri-Maramureș,” in *Marmația*, 7/2, p. 231; the locality of Peri (Grușevo), today, in the Maramureș from across the Tisza, in the Transcarpathian Ukraine.

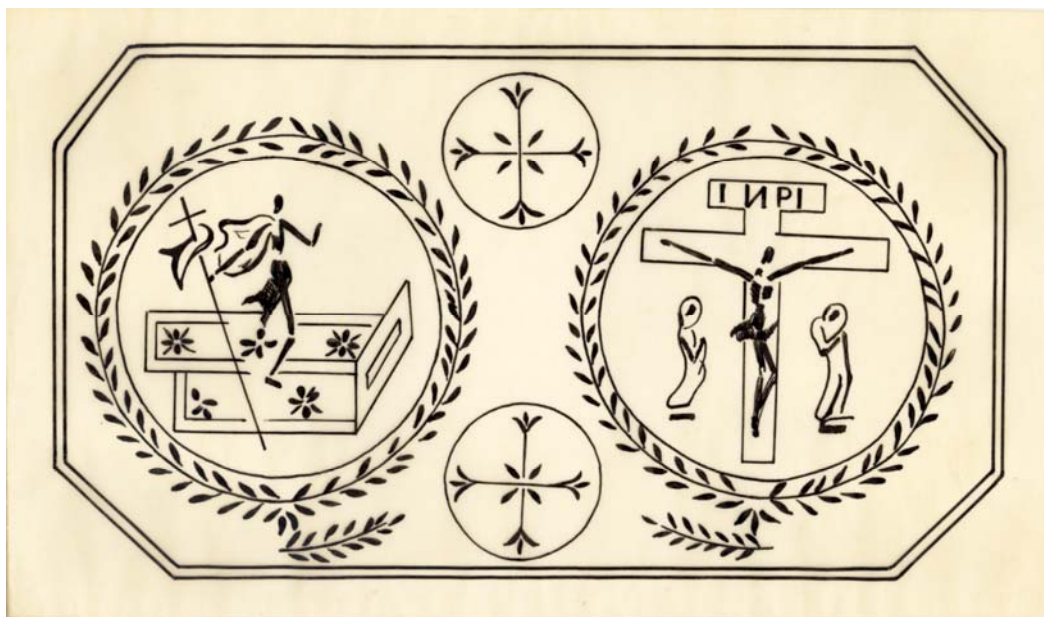


Fig.3



Fig.4