

# Chalice of the Finström Church in Åland – An Addition to Estonian Medieval Goldsmith's Works

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In 2010, I served as the opponent of the PhD dissertation by Visa Immonen, *Golden Moments: Artefacts of Precious Metals as Products of Luxury Consumption in Finland c. 1200–1600*, defended at the University of Turku. In this brilliant thesis, I found a photo of a late fifteenth century chalice from Finström, a rural church in Åland (Finnish Ahvenanmaa), which closely resembles late medieval chalices of Estonia. Since this object was brought to Finland some time after 1600, Mr Immonen did not include it in his analysis, merely presenting the description in the catalogue.

Perhaps the most intriguing detail on the vessel is a Low German inscription on the foot: *desse kelk hord der kerken tom gholdenberghe*, i.e. 'This chalice belongs to the church of Goldenberg'. Valdemar Nyman in 1944, and Immonen in his thesis, assumed that the chalice originated in the Lower Silesian town of Złotoryja (nowadays in south-western Poland), which until 1945 was called Goldberg. They also assumed that the vessel had been stolen from there by Swedish troops as part of the booty during the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648), or the Great Northern War (1700–1721). They thought that later the vessel probably ended up in Tallinn and was taken from there to Finström by the pastor Edvard Nybeck after 1710.

I do not think that this chalice originated in Złotoryja or any other town. In medieval towns, there were usually several churches (e.g. in Złotoryja at least three) and therefore the donors usually specified the church (or even an altar) the vessel was meant for, by referring to the patron saint of the church or to a monastic order it belonged to. It was quite the opposite with parish churches in the countryside: they were identified

by place name, and the patron saint was rarely mentioned in documents or in inscriptions on objects.

Finnish scholars have overlooked the fact that a place called Goldenberg also existed in northern Estonia: it was the medieval name of the Järva-Madise parish. It is very likely that the chalice was donated to this parish and that during the period of intermittent wars in Estonia, from the second half of the sixteenth until the early eighteenth century, it somehow ended up in Tallinn, and from there was taken to Finström.

The form and style of the foot and the stem are similar to several chalices made in Estonia, most probably in Tallinn, during the second half of the fifteenth century. The upper rim of the six-lobed foot is decorated with a line of perforated quatrefoils inside the lozenges. The same element can be seen on at least four other northern Estonian chalices. Similarities are also visible in the form and decoration of the stem and knop (node). The cup of the Finström chalice is post-medieval.

The six semi-circular lobes of the foot are adorned with plant ornaments and with fantastic creatures. The latter, earlier identified as fire-breathing basilisks, are in fact winged dragons. The third, wingless dragon is biting its tail. Dragons in medieval art often functioned as apotropaic signs in liminal places, such as portals, windows, margins of manuscripts and so forth, to protect the sacred buildings or objects and to frighten demons and other evil spirits. The two curling plant leaves on every second lobe, arranged symmetrically around a blossom, resemble a thistle. The thistle was one of the symbols of Christ's Passion and therefore a suitable motif for a vessel containing the Holy Blood.

Thus far, only fifteen medieval chalices were known from Estonia (and three from Latvia); therefore, the Finström (Järva-Madise) chalice is a valuable addition to medieval goldsmith work in the region, particularly due to its rich decorations and fascinating iconography.