

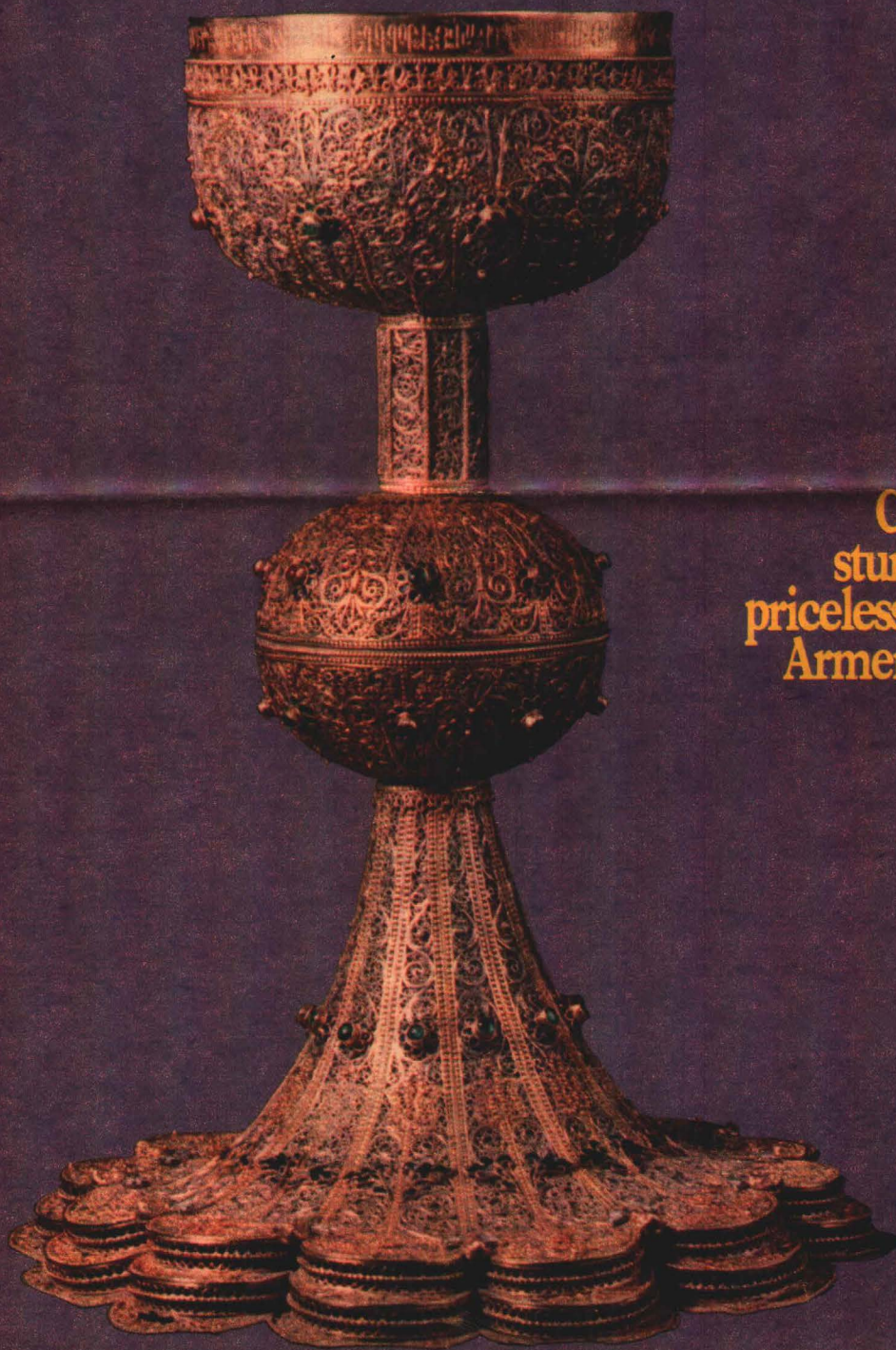
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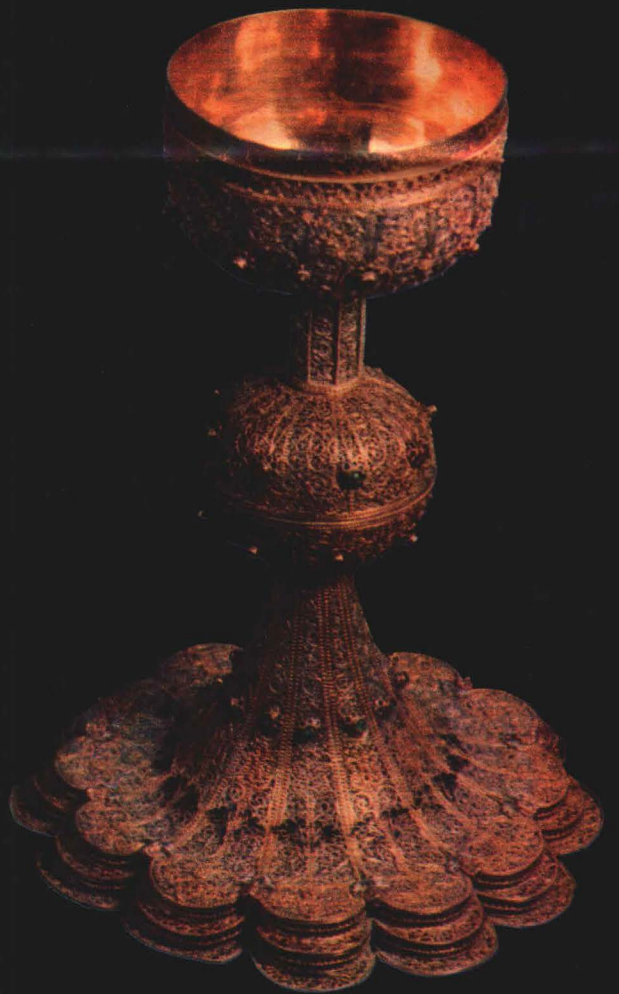
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Found: A rare Armenian relic

The discovery of a gold and silver chalice that is intact after 260 years is rare indeed, especially when you consider it was used by two famous and holy men — on the site of the Crucifixion.

DESPITE its address in the Industrial National Bank building in downtown Providence, there is nothing, absolutely nothing, distinctive about this room. It's a conference room and the people who use it from time to time care only about what's brought into it from the safe deposit vault next door. Collections. Gold. Diamonds. Silver. Coins. Heirlooms. Precious things either too numerous or too big to fit into a safe deposit box.

It was March 20, and Kachador N. Kazarian of Cranston hadn't been to the vault since February 19, when he signed his first contract for storage.

Never in his 45 years had Kazarian owned a single item as monetarily valuable as the chalice that sat before him on the table now. But it wasn't its cash value that occupied his thoughts. The chalice was made in his Armenia, by his people, one of the most persecuted in world history.

Over the centuries, said Kazarian, the Armenians' faith and their church has held them together. Armenia, now one of the 15 states of the Soviet Union, was the first country in the world to accept Christianity as its state religion; that was in 301 A.D.

Kazarian was beaming. Araxie, his wife, sat beside him at the table. She shook her head and said softly and simply that the chalice is beautiful. And they looked expectantly at the priest seated opposite them. He was the Very Reverend Yeghishe Gizirian, an old friend and associate from the Armenian Church of Our Saviour in Worcester, Massachusetts. He was in town to chair a church conference. The Kazarians called, told him of the chalice and asked if he would like to see it.

His eyes were wide and alive. "Amazing, it is so beautiful. In Jerusalem I have seen such things," he said. "But not since. Not here, in this country."

The chalice is made of silver and gold. It measures 13 inches tall, 10 inches across the base, and its body is 12 tapered panels of filigreed silver, each built up in at least two layers, and altogether as delicate and fine as the most intricate of laces. At the base of each panel is the small gilt head of an angel with enameled wings. The uppermost, outer edge of the

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cup is inscribed in classical Armenian, and the entire chalice is studded with 36 small green and red stones.

It was the stones that had brought Tracy Roland to the conference room. As a certified gemologist for Tilden-Thurber, he had been asked to determine whether they were glass or precious gems, perhaps emeralds and rubies.

He thanked the Kazarians for the opportunity to see the chalice. Roland wasn't effusive, just sincerely grateful. An exquisitely ornate chalice doesn't come along every day, after all. And the piece certainly was beautiful.

"The workmanship. It wouldn't be done today. Not like this. And back then, it had to have taken many, many, many months, a couple of years quite possibly, for a silversmith to do this by hand.

"Of course, chalices have always been among the most prized of church relics. First, foremost, because they figure so prominently in the celebration of the Mass; they hold the blood of Christ. Jewels often were incorporated in the making of the chalice out of devotion, wanting to offer God only the best."

Roland took out his eyeglass, his jeweler's loupe, put it over one of the small, rounded, cabochon-cut stones and began his study.

The Kazarians had found and bought the chalice, at an undisclosed price, February 12. He is the president of Walter V. Clarke Associates, Inc. of Providence, Consultants on Human Behavior. They were in New Orleans for a combination pleasure and business trip at the time. After attending some sessions of the annual convention of the National Automobile Dealers Association, they'd gone sightseeing. They had breakfast at Brennan's, took the St. Charles trolley to the end of the line and, on the return trip, got off in the French Quarter to tour and shop a little.

They went into a small shop, a new one where workmen were still painting signs

and putting windows, and Kazarian saw the chalice almost at once. It was alone inside a wood and brass display case, the kind you'd expect to have seen at the corner drug store in the 19th Century.

"I knew what it was as soon as I saw it," Kazarian said. "But I wanted to be nonchalant, so I just sort of ambled over to the case and looked at the card." It read: "Magnificent silver gilt chalice. Middle or Near East. 19th Cent. Coptic? markings." "Coptic" is a reference to a Middle Eastern sect of Christianity that traces its origins to Christ.

Kazarian knew the markings were Armenian, not Coptic. He has been active in the Armenian church since he was nine years old and a choirboy at St. Sahag and St. Mesrob Armenian Apostolic Church in Providence, where he grew up. Today he is an ordained subdeacon of the church, and one of nine members of the Diocesan Council of the Armenian Church of America. Kazarian can speak, write and read Armenian. His instincts told him at once that the chalice was older than the 19th Century.

He read the markings, but could not quite decipher the date. In Armenian, 36 letters are used to indicate all numbers. The first nine letters represent the numbers one through nine in sequence; the second nine, tens; the third nine, hundreds, the fourth nine, thousands.

The date he had was 1169. But that contradicted other information that he had gleaned from the inscription. He'd need help.

From the shop, he called a priest he knew in Detroit; the priest wasn't in, but was expected back soon. Kazarian asked the dealer to hold the chalice for an hour.

Back at the Hotel Bienville, Kazarian called the diocese in New York, but to no avail. He tried Detroit again, reached the priest and got the answer: To date the chalice according to our Gregorian calendar, add 551 years to the inscribed date. The chalice was made, then, in 1720, and

the priest also told him what his own heart had whispered already: "Buy it."

Within an hour, the chalice was his, under his arm and headed back to the hotel.

The Kazarians dined in the hotel that night, with the chalice at the table where they could guard it. He kept the piece at his feet on the plane flight home, and had their friend, Aram Tokmakian, photograph it during the week that followed. Then, while Kazarian took the first steps toward establishing a provenance — a history of the chalice's past 260 years — the relic went to live in Industrial National's vault.

Kazarian and Father Gizirian translated the inscription on the chalice this way: "This chalice, my labor, is dedicated, with the mercy of God, to Grigor and Hovhanness to use at the newly built altar in the Church of the Resurrection on Golgotha," the site of the Crucifixion.

"Grigor" was Grigor the Chainbearer, Armenian patriarch of Jerusalem from 1715 to 1749. He wore a locked chain around his neck until the debts of his people were paid. He literally saved the Jerusalem patriarchate. "Hovhanness" was Hovhanness Colot, Armenian patriarch of Constantinople from 1715 to 1741. He launched an era of tolerance and progress in Constantinople unlike anything the patriarchate had experienced in nearly 300 years. The two patriarchs built new churches, opened new schools, and had books written or translated and printed. They left a legacy unparalleled in Armenian history.

Tracy Roland set his loupe on the conference table. "Glass," he said.

"There are always some bubbles in glass, and I see bubbles. I'm afraid that as best I can determine — and I don't really have any doubt — these are glass. But I think they always were. A couple of stones are missing, but the bezels, the settings, don't seem to have been tampered with, so they are probably original."

Which bothered the Kazarians not at all; money was never the point. Besides, colored glass more befits the means of a workman who, as the inscription implies, made his own masterpiece for his God and the leaders of his church.

Someone, somewhere, in the next several weeks or months will piece together the history of the chalice, and make an estimate of its monetary worth so the Kazarians can insure it. But they didn't buy it as wealth. And they won't sell it for wealth. They'll donate or loan it to a museum for Armenians in this country to see.

"You see, to us, as Armenians, it is priceless," Kazarian said. □