

GOLD COIN NECKLACES AMONG THE ROMA: BETWEEN TRADITION, HISTORICAL REALITY, AND ETHNIC IDENTITY

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Abstract

According to historical and oral testimonies, some Roma groups traditionally wear gold coin necklaces as part of their traditional attire.

These ornaments have a long history, and in the collective imagination of non-Roma populations they are often regarded as a genuine identity marker. Furthermore, some of the Roma individuals interviewed emphasized the distinctive and specific character of these adornments.

Historical evidence indicates that these ornaments may have originated through a process of cultural borrowing from the populations with whom Roma communities came into contact. Over time, however, Roma traditions invested them with particular meanings and significance.

Gold coin necklaces symbolize wealth and prestige. In some cases, they distinguish different Roma groups from one another, functioning as an inter-group identity marker. At the same time, they have served, and continue to serve, as a means of storing wealth and transporting financial assets.

Under the communist regime, Roma communities suffered as a result of the confiscation of these gold coins. Following the 1989 Revolution, only part of the confiscated property was recovered by the descendants of the Roma families concerned.

The gold coin necklace thus represents a genuine historical element, one that is nevertheless imbued with complex symbolic meanings within Roma communities. It functions as an identity marker endowed with strong symbolic significance.

Keywords: gold coin necklaces, identity marker, Roma, communism, cultural borrowing.

1. Rationale, Purpose and Sources

Motto: “Traditional costume is a material ensemble with utilitarian functions, but it is also a cultural creation carrying signs and symbols, a valuable means of communication within the traditional rural community, and an expressive visual language with multiple meanings”. (Maria Bâtcă)².

Among the numerous and diverse clothing elements worn by Romanians and Roma people, I would like to begin a discussion on necklaces made of coins (gold, silver, or substitute metals) worn by Roma women belonging to certain Roma groups. In the collective mind, these ornaments are considered a symbolic element of Roma dress, an identity marker, and, from a historical perspective, an observable reality documented in various testimonies. References to coin necklaces and gold coins have also appeared in discussions regarding the deportation of Roma people to Transnistria as well as during the communist period.

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² Bâtcă Maria, *Costumul popular românesc*, Album de artă populară. Colecție îngrijită de Oana-Gabriela Petrică, Centrul Național pentru Conservarea și Promovarea Culturii Tradiționale, Bucharest, 2006, p. 6.

The purpose of this study is to provide a general overview, without claiming exhaustiveness, of the main information identified in the historical sources available on this subject.

The sources used are diverse, ranging from historical and ethnographic works to memoirs and interviews containing references to the coins and necklaces worn by various Roma groups. Some interviews were identified in memoir literature or press articles, while others were conducted personally during discussions with different individuals³.

2. Coin Necklaces and a Brief History of Their Use

Gold and silver coin necklaces are neither a recent phenomenon nor an ethnic peculiarity. They have been identified among numerous peoples and in different historical periods. Coins have been incorporated into jewelry for thousands of years across many regions of the world and among different social strata⁴.

Within the territories inhabited by Romanians, there is evidence from archaeological treasures indicating the use of coins as clothing ornaments. The metal employed was not necessarily gold; silver and other non-precious metals were also common. Consequently, certain Romanian folk costumes included this accessory in the form of necklaces worn around the neck. A simple examination of ethnographic albums reveals coin necklaces in various forms among women from the regions of Rădăuți, Vlașca, Valea Bistrei, and Lugoj, particularly in costume reconstructions dating from the late nineteenth century. In some cases, the coins appear to have been made of silver⁵. Depending on how a chronology of their appearance and transmission might be reconstructed, one could also assume influences moving in the opposite direction. Ethnographers and ethnologists may be better positioned to clarify this issue⁶.

³ These are three short but informative interviews that were used in the formulation of the article's conclusions.

⁴ “Jewellery made from coins has been found in Egypt, North Africa, and throughout the Mediterranean region, dating back to the Hellenistic period (...). In this context, coins were used primarily as pendants, but also in the manufacture of bracelets, belts, and rings. During the early period (...), clothing represented, according to specialists, an expression of social status, while jewellery constituted an essential element of this system of signification. A direct correlation can be observed between the quantity of ornaments displayed on clothing and jewellery and the social status of the wearer. Beyond their ability to demonstrate wealth and social position, people believed that jewellery made from coins could also provide protection through supernatural powers.” See Stephanie Caruso, “Wearing Coins in Late Antiquity,” The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 23 January 2024, available at: <https://www.metmuseum.org/perspectives/gold-pectoral-with-coins>, accessed 6 June 2026.

⁵ Ștefănoi Doina, Popoiu Paula, *Costumul românesc de patrimoniu din colecțiile Muzeului Național al Satului „Dimitrie Gusti”*, Editor Alcor Edimpex, Bucharest, 2008, pp. 26–27, 52, 88, 91.

⁶ For example, Alexandrina Enăchescu-Cantemir stated, with a certain degree of regret: “Not long ago, the whole of Moldavia beyond the Siret River shared the same costume as the mountainous region of Moldavia; however, foreigners who settled in those places and the factories disrupted the entire traditional order.” See Enăchescu-Cantemir Alexandrina, *Portul popular românesc. Porturi din deosebite ținuturi românești*, Scrisul Românesc S.A.,

This observation is important because both Roma testimonies and specialized ethnographic, historical, and sociological literature frequently suggest that Roma people borrowed this accessory from Banat Romanians. Such a claim appears, for example, in an interview with the self-proclaimed Roma king Sorin Cioabă⁷, as well as on websites belonging to Roma organizations and cultural initiatives⁸. Thus, the idea has become widespread and accepted by many authors, even though it is not always sufficiently documented.

As is well known, Roma communities have lived throughout most Romanian regions, making it difficult to accept a single source of ethnographic influence. As noted above, Romanian folk costume includes coin necklaces not only in Banat but also in Moldavia and Wallachia. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume the existence of multiple and multidirectional cultural borrowings. Furthermore, throughout their migration toward and across Europe, Roma groups may also have adopted clothing elements from other populations with whom they came into contact.

The image of the Roma woman wearing a coin necklace is also deeply rooted in artistic representations. The painter Octav Băncilă, for example, is known for numerous works depicting Roma subjects. One of his paintings is even entitled *Gypsy Woman with Necklace and Pipe* (c. 1914–1915). The necklace in this work is composed of metal coins. Similar ornaments appear in other paintings by Băncilă, as well as in the works of many other artists.

Regardless of the exact moment when this accessory entered Roma dress—whether during the period of migration, during slavery in the Romanian Principalities, or at a later stage—it is certain that Roma people were already wearing necklaces and coins attached to clothing during the nineteenth century. Thus, a description of a Roma group that had reached Western Europe noted the following characteristic element of their attire: “Their travels extended through several countries of Western Europe (...). Their women, with gold coins braided into their hair and necklaces strung around their necks and across their chests, constituted an extraordinary sight”⁹.

first edition, 1939, “Introducere”, p. 8, available at: <https://archive.org/details/alexandrina-enachescu-cantemir-portul-popular-romanesc-1938/page/139/mode/2up>, accessed 3 June 2026.

⁷ Găină Ramona, “Ce simbolizează, de fapt, salbele țigănești? Unde își fac țiganii bănuții de aur și câte monede se pun în salba unei fete considerată o «partidă bună»”, *Adevărul*, 26 March 2015, available at: <https://adevarul.ro/stiri-locale/sibiu/ce-simbolizeaza-de-fapt-salbele-tiganesti-unde-1610395.html>, accessed 7 June 2026.

⁸ The same statement can also be found in the article “Portul tradițional al romilor”, published on *Roma's Stories*, available at: <https://www.romastories.ro/portul-traditional-al-romilor/>, accessed 1 June 2026.

⁹ Winstedt E.O., “The Gypsy Copersmiths’ Invasion of 1911–1913”, *JGLS*, 2nd series, vol. 6 (1912–1913), pp. 244–303, apud Fraser Angus, *Țiganii. Originile, migrația și prezența lor în Europa*, Editura Humanitas, Bucharest, 2017, p. 246.

3. Symbolic Meanings

According to anthropological research conducted among Roma communities in Romania, the wearing of gold coins and coin necklaces can be interpreted as an expression of material prosperity, ethnic identity, and family prestige¹⁰. Accessories such as the apron, the headscarf tied at the back of the head (*diklo*), strings of shells, gold coins, and hair braided into two long plaits extended with woven textile cords all form part of traditional women's attire¹¹.

Numerous written testimonies portray the image of the Roma woman wearing a necklace around her neck. One such account describes a visit to a café frequented by musicians: *“Near the pharmacy on the corner there is a small café—the gathering place of the musicians from Dudești. I entered (...). A stout woman wearing a yellow headscarf and a coin necklace around her neck led me there”*¹².

The practice of braiding silver coins into women's hair was also widespread:.

*Another testimony states: “Both girls and married women wear valuable necklaces made of old silver and gold coins worth several gold pieces”. This statement is significant because it was included in an educational textbook intended for use in schools and originates from D. Dan's work The Gypsies of Bukovina (1892)*¹³.

The well-known Roma scholar Delia Grigore emphasizes that, within traditional Roma culture, gold is not primarily regarded as an object of exchange or a commercial asset, but rather as a spiritual value. Gold is considered a bearer of good fortune and therefore should not be alienated through sale. If stolen, it is believed to bring misfortune. Gold is given only in ritual circumstances and is preserved within the family. Furthermore, in marital customs, gold coins do not function as commercial payment but rather as part of a ritual exchange of values between the bride and gold. Consequently, the gold coins are not used by the bride's family for commercial purposes; instead, they contribute to the establishment of the new household and are preserved for future generations¹⁴.

¹⁰ Tesăr Cătălina, “Țigan bun tradițional în România, cerșetor de-etnicizat în străinătate. Politici ale re-prezentării publice și etica muncii la romii cortorari”, in Ștefania Toma and László Foszto (eds.), *Spectrum. Cercetări sociale despre romi*, Cluj-Napoca, Editura ISPMN and Editura Kriterion, 2011, pp. 281–312.

¹¹ Hasdeu Miric Iulia, “Corp și veșminte ale femeilor rome din România. O perspectivă antropologică”, in Vintilă Mihailescu and Petre Matei (eds.), *Condiția roma și schimbarea discursului*, Bucharest, Editura Polirom, 2014, pp. 73–90.

¹² „Portul tradițional al romilor”, op. cit.

¹³ Petcuț Petre, Grigore Delia, Sandu Maria, *Istoria și tradițiile rromilor*, Editura Ro Media, Bucharest, 2003, p. 60.

¹⁴ Grigore Delia, “Căsătoria în cultura tradițională rromani”, published on the website of Centrul Național de Cultură a Romilor – Romano Kher, available at: <https://cncr.gov.ro/casatoria-in-cultura-traditionala-rromani/>, accessed 1 June 2026.

With regard to accessories and jewelry, Roma women traditionally wore earrings and bead necklaces. During the twentieth century, increasing numbers of women began wearing gold jewelry, including thick necklaces, bracelets, rings, and earrings. Necklaces made of gold coins could also form part of a bride's dowry¹⁵.

4. What Types of Coins Were Used in the Necklaces?

At first glance, most of the coins found in traditional Roma necklaces appear to have been minted by the Austrian Mint during the reign of Emperor Franz Joseph. These coins were struck in 24-carat gold. The larger pieces weighed approximately fourteen grams, while the smaller ones weighed about one quarter of that amount. During the communist period, alongside these coins, there circulated the so-called *cocoșei* (“little roosters”), which included French, Swiss, and Romanian gold coins. Over time, the term *cocoșei* came to designate several categories of gold coins. The name derives from the French twenty-franc gold coin of the *Marianne et le Coq* type, issued between 1899 and 1914. It appears that between 1946 and 1983 the Romanian state did not issue gold or silver coins, which further increased the symbolic and economic importance of older coins¹⁶.

During and after the Second World War, a significant trade in *cocoșei*, Napoleons, and *poli* developed in Romania. These coins functioned as a means of protection against inflation and currency instability¹⁷.

Another type of coin associated with Roma necklaces was the *mahmudea*, particularly among Roma groups from Wallachia. A news report concerning former Romanian President Traian Băsescu mentions his attendance at a Roma wedding, where his wife received a traditional Roma skirt, a headscarf, and a *mahmudea*—a gold coin—as a gift from the sister of the self-proclaimed Roma king Florin Cioabă¹⁸.

¹⁵ Mihailă Patricia, “Hainele tradiționale romani, între simboluri și utilitate practică. Explicăm”, interview with Liubovi Bucur and Savelii Duminică, *Moldova.org*, 26 December 2023, available at: <https://www.moldova.org/hainele-traditionale-romani-intre-simboluri-si-utilitate-practica-explicam/>, accessed 1 June 2026.

¹⁶ Vilcu Aurel, Dima Mihai, *Monede de aur din colecții românești*, edited by Ernest Oberländer-Târnoveanu, Bucharest, Institutul de Memorie Culturală (cIMeC), 2001, available at: <https://patrimoniul.ro/patrimoniu-imaterial/articles/monede-de-aur-din-colectii-romanesti>, accessed 7 June 2026.

¹⁷ Vasiliță Ștefan, “Cocoșei de aur – de unde și până unde?”, *Historia*, available at: <https://historia.ro/sectiune/general/cocoseii-de-aur-de-unde-si-pana-unde-572985.html>, accessed 2 June 2026.

¹⁸ “Traian Băsescu a dansat țigănește, la Festivalul romilor de la Costești!”, *Știrile ProTV*, 8 September 2009, available at: <https://stirileprotv.ro/stiri/politic/basescu-a-dansat-alaturi-de-florin-cioaba-la-festivalul-romilor.html>, accessed 7 June 2026.

An interview conducted by the ethnomusicologist Speranța Rădulescu also revealed references to large quantities of „mamudele” (a colloquial form of „mahmudele”) being offered during wedding celebrations¹⁹.

It appears that the stock of Ottoman, Austrian, and Venetian gold coins dating from the second half of the eighteenth century and the first decades of the nineteenth century, which supplied the Romanian market for the production of coin necklaces, was so substantial that such coins remained available well into the twentieth century²⁰.

5. The Role of Coin Necklaces among Roma Communities

a. Mobile Storage of Wealth

Even today, gold remains the principal form of wealth among many Roma communities. According to testimonies from Roma individuals, wealth is often measured primarily by the amount of gold a person owns rather than by other possessions or properties, even when these may be worth more in monetary terms²¹.

The Roma preference for gold appears to have practical origins. Historically, many Roma families did not possess land, real estate, or other forms of fixed property. Their wealth therefore consisted largely of money, often in the form of gold coins known as *galbeni*. Initially, necklaces consisted of a single coin, but gradually more coins were added over time. As Dorin Cioabă explained: „*To prevent these coins from being lost or stolen, Roma women pierced them, threaded them together, and wore them around their necks*”²². Gold could thus be transported easily from one place to another, an important advantage for communities with a nomadic lifestyle²³: „*It was a solution they adopted because, being nomadic, they needed to invest their money in something valuable, but they could not invest in things that were difficult or impossible to transport*”²⁴.

In an interview with a Roma leader, it was stated that among the various Roma groups in Romania, the Căldărari possess the largest quantities of gold. The same source notes that much of this gold was traditionally held without formal ownership documents. An elderly

¹⁹ Rădulescu Speranța, *Taifasuri despre muzica țigănească*, chapter “Al treilea taifas. Cu Clanul D.”, Editura Paideia, Bucharest, 2015, p. 85.

²⁰ Vilcu Aurel, Dima Mihai, *op.cit.*

²¹ Găină Ramona, *op. cit.*

²² Mihailă Patricia, *op.cit.*

²³ „Portul tradițional al romilor”, *op. cit.*

²⁴ Găină Ramona, *op. cit.*

Roma woman, Tasia Stănescu, expressed a similar view, stating that significant quantities of gold were owned mainly by the Căldărari, who had acquired it through honest work²⁵.

The wife of G.A. Lăzurică, the well-known interwar Roma leader, recalled the financial hardships experienced by her family: “*I sold my necklace, my carpets, and my paintings—the wealth I had received from my parents—in order to help my husband*”²⁶.

Coins were not used exclusively for necklaces. Young women often received gold coins when visiting their parents or upon the birth of a child. At weddings, gifts were frequently offered in the form of gold coins rather than money, ranging from a single coin to twenty or thirty coins depending on the status of the donor. As Dorin Cioabă further noted: “*The wealth of Roma people is measured by the quantity of coins they possess, and if you do not have gold, you are considered poor*”²⁷.

b. The Bride and the Coin Necklace: Value and Symbolism

The coins incorporated into necklaces also functioned as a form of financial security. They could be used in times of need, such as weddings, funerals, or other important family events, and circulated among relatives and community members when assistance was required²⁸.

One description of traditional Roma customs states: “*A married woman must keep her head covered at all times with a scarf. The skirt is long, multilayered, and brightly coloured; she wears large earrings, long braided hair, and sometimes a flower in her hair or gold coins*”²⁹. Girls traditionally left their parental homes with a dowry consisting of clothing and gold jewelry, including the ritual necklace, which symbolized premarital initiation and readiness for marriage³⁰.

The symbolic significance of the necklace is also reflected in folklore. A traditional verse states: “*Bride with a wedding crown/ Your necklace rings around your neck,/ On you*

²⁵ Dobrescu Petre, “Țiganiile declanșează goana după aur”, interview with Tasia Stănescu, a Roma woman from Vărate, and Ion Stănescu, a Roma man from Suceava, *Libertatea*, available at: <https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/tiganiile-declanseaza-goana-dupa-aur-45555>, accessed 2 June 2026.

²⁶ Lăzurică G.A., “Un cuvânt din partea mea către femeile rome”, testimonial letter, in Marushiakova Elena and Popov Vesselin (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 450.

²⁷ Găină Ramona, *op. cit.*

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

²⁹ “Splendoarea portului tradițional al romilor: femei și bărbați în culori și tradiții”, *Povești Romantice*, available at: <https://www.povestirromantice.ro/splendoarea-portului-traditional-al-romilor-femei-si-barbati-in-culori-si-traditii/>, accessed 1 June 2026.

³⁰ Grigore Delia, *Romanipen. Fundamente ale culturii rromani*, Centrul Național de Cultură a Romilor Romano Kher, p. 70, available at: <https://rom4india.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/464258820-rromanipen-fundamente-ale-culturii-rromani-pdf.pdf>, accessed 1 June 2026.

and on your bridal bed/ For you are the daughter of a wealthy man!”. This example demonstrates that the necklace itself became a recurring folkloric motif associated with wealth, prestige, and marriage³¹.

Sources that distinguish between different Roma groups indicate variations in the use of coin necklaces and related clothing practices³². Among the *Spoitori* Roma, women adorn themselves on special occasions with gold necklaces, earrings, rings, bracelets, crowns, and other ornaments. Their necklaces may consist of between ten and forty twenty-four-carat gold coins attached to a piece of velvet and worn as a visible display of wealth³³.

By contrast, among the Carpathian Roma of Transylvania, some sources report that women traditionally did not wear coins in their hair or coin necklaces, regarding such embellishments as unnecessary additions incompatible with ideals of feminine purity and modesty³⁴. Among the Căldărari, brides traditionally receive a dowry that may include large pillows, gold coins (*galbeni*), clothing, refrigerators, and televisions. Wealthier families may offer their daughters between two hundred and three hundred gold coins as part of the wedding gift, with the necklace often wrapped two or three times around the bride's neck³⁵.

From the earliest necklaces inherited from nomadic ancestors emerged the custom of preparing special necklaces for marriageable daughters. What began as a single coin gradually evolved into increasingly elaborate necklaces containing many coins. Today, in some communities, the number of coins included in a girl's necklace may even become a subject of negotiation during marriage arrangements. To be regarded as coming from a respectable and prosperous family, a girl is often expected to possess a necklace containing at least thirty gold coins. Some authors distinguish between “everyday necklaces,” consisting of three to five coins, and “ceremonial necklaces,” which contain significantly larger numbers of coins. Girls

³¹ Stănescu Camelia, “Rromii căldărari”, in Alexandrescu Gabriela (ed.), *Tradiții ale rromilor din spațiul românesc*, Editura Salvați Copiii, Bucharest, 2004, p. 29, available at: <https://mh.edu.ro/fisiere/minoritati%20nationale/Traditii %20ale %20rromilor %20din %20spatiul %20romaneesc.pdf>, accessed 1 June 2026.

³² The heterogeneity of Roma groups and traditions was also emphasized in my doctoral research; see Trușă Dan-Victor, *Profilul și imaginea rromilor în mentalul colectiv hunedorean. 1918–1989*, Editura Argonaut, Cluj-Napoca, 2022, chapter “Concluzii cumulate și interpretări extinse”, p. 510.

³³ Giani Grigore Muti, Moisesu Sorin Cristian, “Tradiții și obiceiuri ale rromilor spoitori căldărășeni”, in Alexandrescu Gabriela (ed.), *Tradiții ale rromilor din spațiul românesc*, Editura Salvați Copiii, Bucharest, 2004, p. 41, available at: <https://mh.edu.ro/fisiere/minoritati%20nationale/Traditii %20ale %20rromilor %20din %20spatiul %20romaneesc.pdf>, accessed 1 June 2026.

³⁴ Căpuș Olga, “Rromii carpatici”, in Gabriela Alexandrescu (ed.), *Tradiții ale rromilor din spațiul românesc*, Editura Salvați Copiii, Bucharest, 2004, p. 63, available at: <https://mh.edu.ro/fisiere/minoritati%20nationale/Traditii %20ale %20rromilor %20din %20spatiul %20romaneesc.pdf>, accessed 1 June 2026.

³⁵ Stănescu Camelia, *op.cit.*

may also wear coins braided into their hair³⁶. According to certain accounts, even the wedding oath may be sworn upon the coins of the bride's gold necklace during the wedding night³⁷.

Referring to the Vlach Roma, Angus Fraser observes: “*The bride-price demanded by the girl's father is of vital importance. It may be set at a level beyond what most Roma can afford (...). The number of gold coins to be paid tends to remain relatively stable, although it may vary according to the status of the bride's and groom's fathers, the standing of the two families, the girl's reputation and morality, and her earning potential. In exceptional circumstances, however, no bride-price is paid*”³⁸.

The Roma folktale *Wisdom and Fortune* offers an allegorical perspective on the symbolism of gold. In the story, Wisdom and Fortune personify two fundamental principles of human existence: intelligence and luck. The narrative suggests that wealth, when unaccompanied by prudence, can bring danger and conflict. Gold is therefore portrayed not merely as a symbol of prosperity but also as a potential source of risk, greed, and social tension. The tale ultimately emphasizes that wealth must be managed wisely and that wisdom is more valuable than the mere possession of gold³⁹.

6. The Hunt for Gold⁴⁰

The Antonescu-Era Pursuit of Gold

During the deportation of Roma people to Transnistria—a process that resulted in the deaths of many individuals—there are also numerous testimonies concerning the loss of personal wealth. According to official regulations, those deported were primarily nomadic Roma, individuals unable to prove a stable source of income, and persons with criminal records. In principle, therefore, the deportations targeted poor Roma. In practice, however, the groups sent to Transnistria included many other categories of Roma, often through arbitrary and abusive decisions. Historical testimonies refer both to the confiscation of gold coins and to

³⁶ Găină Ramona, *op. cit.*

³⁷ Rotaru Florentina, “Valori culturale regăsite în etnia rromă”, in *Multicultural Education, Training Space for Values Education*, 2nd Edition, p. 275, available at: https://ibn.idsi.md/sites/default/files/imag_file/p-270-278.pdf, accessed 1 June 2026.

³⁸ Fraser Angus, *op.cit.*, p. 254.

³⁹ Borcoi Jupiter, Sarău Gheorghe, Pandelică Nicolae and Cordovan Ionel, *Povești și povestiri rrom (Paramică thaj phenimata le rromenqe)*, Botoșani, Editura Arena Cărții, 2012, p. 56.

⁴⁰ I will not be able to discuss this topic in detail due to space limitations, as it belongs to a historical and legal domain that falls outside the thematic scope of the present study. Nevertheless, it deserves brief mention because of its considerable historical and imagological significance.

desperate attempts by their owners to use these valuables in order to improve their chances of survival during deportation⁴¹.

According to one collector of testimonies, Roma methods of concealing gold were often more ingenious than those employed by Jews under similar circumstances. These strategies sometimes surprised the authorities and occasionally allowed individuals to avoid complete confiscation. One testimony recounts: *“When crossing the Dniester, people would bend large gold coins into four pieces, take a little water in their hands, and swallow them with polenta or a piece of bread, whatever they had. Those who had gold swallowed it; those who did not, simply did not. Others attached it to their trousers or inside the collars of their clothes”*⁴².

Another testimony from the same source states: *“The Roma were robbed by the gendarmes just like the Jews. The gendarmes searched for gold, silver, and money (...). Many Roma hid their gold coins and silver objects in their wagons, inside the central axle or beneath the floorboards (...). At the bridge over the Dniester we remained for two weeks, and they took our gold and all the Romanian money they found, giving us Russian currency in exchange when we crossed to the other side (...). Cases of Roma being shot were rarer than among the Jews, but they too were terrorized into surrendering their property. The same witness recalled using a gold coin after returning to Romania: “I went to a woman and asked her for two eggs, telling her I would pay. I broke off one coin from the necklace I had inherited from my mother-in-law and gave it to her. In return, she gave me an egg and a piece of bread”*⁴³

The Communist-Era Pursuit of Gold

The communist state also attempted to gain control over the gold held by certain Roma families⁴⁴. A well-known historian noted: *„Their valuables—the large Austro-Hungarian gold coins that represented their preferred form of savings—were confiscated by the Police and the Securitate, and their owners never escaped harassment”*⁴⁵.

⁴¹ I intend to return to this important topic in a future article. It is a particularly sensitive issue that has received relatively little scholarly attention.

⁴² Cioabă Luminița Mihai, *Lacrimi rome = Romane asva*, Ro Media, Bucharest, 2006, “Interviu cu unchiul Melu, din Sebeș”, p. 37.

⁴³ *Ibidem.*, p. 65.

⁴⁴ Decree No. 244/1978 stipulated that all jewellery made of precious metals could be manufactured only within socialist enterprises and had to bear an official state hallmark. Furthermore, only these enterprises were authorized to trade in gold. These regulations led to the confiscation of precious metals from many individuals, regardless of their social status. Nomadic Roma were also among those targeted. See Donald Kenrick, *Rromii: din India la Mediterana. Migrația rromilor*, translated from English by Laura Lotreanu, Bucharest, Editura Alternative, 1998, p. 140.

⁴⁵ Fraser Angus, *op.cit.*, pp. 298-299.

Another testimony, this time originating from within the repressive apparatus itself, offers a striking description of these practices: „*The Roma would not surrender their gold unless they were blackmailed in some way. I went and taught my colleagues what to do. We formed teams, went to each family, searched attics and every possible place, looking for the distilling equipment they manufactured illegally, and confiscated it. There was a tacit understanding between the Militia and them: we allow you to make stills illegally, and you give us gold. When they forgot to pay, the Militia would come. At the end of the operation, the wealthier families gave one large gold coin, the others a smaller one, and the Militia's 'harvest' amounted to around forty or fifty gold coins.*”⁴⁶. In some cases, not all confiscated gold was officially reported. As Roma leader Rudi Varga observed: “*Where the missing gold ended up, nobody knows*”⁴⁷.

Another researcher points out that the confiscation of gold from private individuals was carried out under Decrees no. 210/1960 and 244/1978, while the confiscated *cocoșei* were stored by the National Bank of Romania⁴⁸. The same author notes that Roma communities were often controlled through their traditional leaders and that the release of Roma individuals detained by the Militia could sometimes depend on the number of gold coins their families were willing to surrender.”⁴⁹.

Victor Marinache, a Roma man from Teleorman County, even recalled cases in which some Roma were allegedly shot because they refused to reveal where they had hidden their gold.⁵⁰.

Conclusions

The historical sources examined in this study indicate that coin necklaces were worn in various regions of Romania and that their diffusion cannot be explained solely by influence from Banat Romanian communities. Likewise, testimonies concerning both the deportations to Transnistria and the communist-era persecution of gold owners suggest that this valuable accessory was not limited to a single Roma group, even though several sources particularly

⁴⁶ Georgescu Alexandra, “Cum confisca Miliția aurul țiganilor de la Strehaia”, *Adevărul*, 26 March 2015, available at: <https://adevarul.ro/stiri-locale/turnu-severin/cum-confisca-militia-aurul-tiganilor-de-la-1607858.html>, accessed 2 June 2026.

⁴⁷ Zoltan Petru, “La noi aurul e ca pământul la români”, interview with Rudi Varga, leader of the Roma community in Gilău, *Jurnalul Național*, “Povestea aurului” series, available at: <https://jurnalul.ro/editie-de-colectie/povestea-aurului/la-noi-aurul-e-ca-pamantul-la-romani-520117.html>, accessed 2 June 2026

⁴⁸ Nastasă-Matei Irina (ed.), *Rromii din România. Identitate și alteritate. Manual auxiliar didactic*, Editura Școala Ardeleană, Cluj-Napoca, n.d., p. 95.

⁴⁹ „Portul tradițional al romilor”, op. cit.

⁵⁰ Petcuț Petre, Grigore Delia, Sandu Mariaa, op.cit., p.74

associate it with the Căldărari. While the Căldărari constitute one of the largest Roma groups, the diversity of Roma communities and the limited availability of research data make definitive conclusions difficult.

Some Roma women have worn—and continue to wear—necklaces made of gold, silver, or substitute metals resembling precious metals. One young Roma woman interviewed by the author mentioned a variation of the necklace tradition consisting of strings of coins worn around the waist, a practice that survived until relatively recently among women in her community. In this case, the coins were not made of gold but of common metals⁵¹.

Additional contemporary testimonies from non-Roma observers indicate the continued use of coin necklaces, including coins woven into hair or attached to garments, during weddings and other ceremonial events. One witness described an extravagant wedding held in Timișoara around 2011–2012, characterized by luxury cars and lavish spending. The bride wore several necklaces whose coins appeared to be made of gold. Particularly noteworthy was the statement of one of the guests “We want to show that we are wealthier than the Romanians⁵². Although the specific Roma group involved is unknown, the witness identified the clothing as characteristic of Roma ethnicity

A similar testimony was obtained regarding Craiova during approximately the same period. The interviewee recalled seeing a group of Roma in the city centre during a festive event, possibly a wedding, where women wore necklaces adorned with what appeared to be gold coins⁵³.

The transformations that have occurred in both the composition and the manner of wearing coin necklaces illustrate the dynamic character of tradition. What originally served as a practical method of safeguarding wealth gradually evolved into a means of displaying prosperity and facilitating ritual exchanges and gifts on special occasions.

The replacement of gold coins with pieces made of common metals, as well as their integration into different clothing elements, should not necessarily be interpreted as the abandonment of tradition. Rather, these changes reflect the adaptation of tradition to new economic, social, and cultural realities. The phenomenon may therefore be understood as a process of refunctionalization and reinvention, through which symbolic and identity-related values are preserved even when the physical form of the ornament changes.

⁵¹ Witness G.M., ethnic Roma, 16 years old, Deva, interview conducted by the author.

⁵² Witness C.E., Romanian ethnicity, 38 years old, Hunedoara, interview conducted by the author; Witness O.R., Romanian ethnicity, 40 years old, Hunedoara, interview conducted by the author.

⁵³ *Ibidem*.

The family histories associated with valuable coins during the deportations to Transnistria, as well as the confiscations carried out during the communist period, deserve further scholarly attention. These experiences concern not only Roma communities themselves but also the broader relationship between Roma populations, surrounding societies, and the institutions of the Romanian state. They may also help explain some of the enduring images and perceptions associated with Roma identity in the collective mind.

At the same time, the magical and symbolic dimensions of these necklaces deserve a more detailed discussion. Such an undertaking, however, would require extensive comparative ethnographic research and exceeds the scope of the present study.

Whether made of gold, silver, or substitute metals, and whether worn as necklaces or incorporated into other garments, these coins continue to fascinate and attract admiration. They represent a genuine historical reality while simultaneously carrying complex symbolic meanings for Roma communities. As powerful identity markers, they preserve and transmit a rich historical legacy, telling a story that stretches across generations.

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