

Norse Drinking Traditions

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Hávamál (Sayings of the High One)

11. *Byrþi betri / berrat maþr brautu at,
an sé manvit mikit;
auþi betra / þykkir þat í okunnun staþ,
slíkt es válaþs vera.*

[A better burden / no man can bear
on the way than his mother wit:
and no worse provision / can he carry with him
than too deep a draught of ale.]

12. *Esa svá gott, / sem gott kveþa,
ól alda sunum,
þvit fæ'ra veit, / es fleira drekk,
síns til geþs gumi.*

[Less good than they say / for the sons of men
is the drinking oft of ale:
for the more they drink, / the less they can think
and keep a watch over their wits.]

13. *Óminnis hegrí heitr / sás of ölþrum þrumir,
hann stelr geþi guma;
þess fugls fjöþrum / ek fjötraþr vask
í garþi Gunnlaþar.*

[A bird of Unmindfulness / flutters over ale-feasts,
wiling away men's wits;
with the feathers of that fowl / I was fettered once
in the garths of Gunnlodr below.]

14. *Ölr ek varþ, / varþ ofrólví
at ens fróþa Fjalars;
því's ölþr bazi, / at apr of heimtír
hverr sitt geþ gumi.*

[Drunk was I then, / I was over-drunk,
in the fold of wise Fjalar;
But best is an ale feast / when a man is able
to call back his wits at once.]

These are the words of the great god Ódinn, cautioning against drunkenness and unrestrained drinking. And yet the drinking of alcoholic beverages was a prominent feature of Scandinavian life in the Viking Age.

Unfortunately, while there are many passing references in Old Norse literature and occasional bits

of evidence in the archaeological record, there is far from a complete picture of Viking Age brewing, vintning, and drinking customs. In the course of this paper, evidence from several Germanic cultures will be presented to help fill out the evidence and provide a more complete view of this topic. Although the culture of other Germanic peoples was not exactly like that of the Norse, many similarities exist. In the case of drinking and rituals associated with drinking, the Old English materials seem to present the best detailed view of this activity, which further enlightens the materials surviving from Norse culture.

Many pieces of related evidence survive, even from the earliest records of the Germanic peoples. There are significant similarities that suggest the fundamental structure of drinking as a formal ritual activity was established in the early Germanic tribes before the Migration Age split the Germanic peoples into their familiar nations of the modern day.

Drinking and drinking customs among the Germanic tribes were recorded by Romans such as P. Cornelius Tacitus in his *Germania*:

Lauti cibum capiunt: separatae singulis sedes et sua cuique mensa. Tum ad negotia nec minus saepe ad convivia procedunt armati. Diem noctemque continuare potando nulli probrum. Crebrae, ut inter vinolentos, rixae raro conviciis, saepius caede et vulneribus transiguntur. Sed et de reconciliandis in vicem inimicis et iungendis adfinitatibus et adsciscendis principibus, de pace denique ac bello plerumque in conviviis consultant, tamquam nullo magis tempore aut ad simplices cogitationes pateat animus aut ad magnas incalescat. Gens non astuta nec callida aperit adhuc secreta pectoris licentia ioci; ergo detecta et nuda omnium mens. Postera die retractatur, et salva utriusque temporis ratio est: deliberant, dum fingere nesciunt, constituunt, dum errare non possunt.

Potui umor ex hordeo aut frumento, in quendam similitudinem vini corruptus: proximi ripae et vinum mercantur. Cibi simplices, agrestia poma, recens fera aut lac concretum: sine apparatu, sine blandimentis expellunt famem. Adversus sitim non eadem temperantia. Si indulseris ebrietati suggerendo quantum concupiscunt, haud minus facile vitiiis quam armis vincentur.

[To pass an entire day and night in drinking disgraces no one. Their quarrels, as might be expected with intoxicated people, are seldom fought out with mere abuse, but commonly with wounds and bloodshed. Yet it is at their feasts that they generally consult on the reconciliation of enemies, on the forming of matrimonial alliances, on the choice of chiefs, finally even on peace and war, for they think that at no time is the mind more open to simplicity of purpose or more warmed to noble aspirations. A race without either

natural or acquired cunning, they disclose their hidden thoughts in the freedom of the festivity. Thus the sentiments of all having been discovered and laid bare, the discussion is renewed on the following day, and from each occasion its own peculiar advantage is derived. They deliberate when they have no power to dissemble; they resolve when error is impossible.

A liquor for drinking is made of barley or other grain, and fermented into a certain resemblance to wine. The dwellers on the river-bank also buy wine. Their food is of a simple kind, consisting of wild fruit, fresh game, and curdled milk. They satisfy their hunger without elaborate preparation and without delicacies. In quenching their thirst they are equally moderate. If you indulge their love of drinking by supplying them with as much as they desire, they will be overcome by their own vices as easily as by the arms of an enemy.]

The staple grain cultivated during the Viking Age and medieval period in Scandinavia was barley, and it may have been the only grain grown in Iceland up through the point at which the mini-Ice Age of the 14th century made it impossible to grow grain in Iceland at all. Most of the barley was used to brew ale, which was the staple beverage of all classes. Even children drank ale daily, especially in urban areas. (Skaarup, p. 134). The Old English didactic work *Ælfric's Colloquy* shows just how ale was regarded in early Northern Europe: when the novice is asked what he drinks, he replies, "*Ealu gif ic hæbbe, oppe wæter gif ic næbbe ealu*" (Ale if I have it, water if I have no ale).



Silver cup from Jelling

Early Northern Europeans were quite familiar with alcoholic beverages made from the fermentation of grain. In 77 A.D., the Roman encyclopaedist Gaius Plinius Secundus (Pliny the Elder) recorded in his *Historia Naturalis* that beer was known to the various tribes of Northern Europe under many different names.

It should be noted that while the modern words "beer" and "ale" are today almost interchangeable, there is good evidence that shows that the two drinks were very different in early Northern Europe. It is clear from Old English and Old Norse sources that ale (Old English *ealu*, Old Norse *öl*) was produced from malted grain. However, literary analysis shows that Old English *beor* and Old Norse *björr* are terms used for sweet alcoholic beverages. Until the last ten

years or so, philologists thought that *beor* and *björr* were derived from the word for barley, and it is only recently that it was realized that the term almost certainly referred to cider (whether from apples or pears) during the Viking Age (Hagen pp. 205-206; Roesdahl, p. 120). English translations of the sagas will translate both *öl* and *björr* interchangeably as beer or ale, and so are not a good guide to the actual terminology being used in the original Old Norse text. To sow further confusion, in the Eddaic poem *Alvíssmál* verses 34 and 35, a variety of Old Norse terms related to fermented beverages appear and are implied to be synonyms:

Þórr kvað:
Segðu mér þat Alvíss, - öll of rök fira
vörumk, dverggr, at vitir,
hvé þat öl heitir, er drekka alda synir,
heimi hverjum í?"

Alvíss kvað:
Öl heitir með mönnum, en með ásum björr,
kalla veig vanir,
hreinalög jötnar, en í helju mjöð,
kalla sumbl Suttungs synir.

[Thórr said:
 Tell me, Alvis-- for all wights' fate
 I deem that, dwarf, thou knowest--
 how the ale is hight, which is brewed by men,
 in all the worlds so wide?

Alvíss said:
 'Tis hight *öl* (ale) among men; among Aesir *björr*
 (cider);
 the Vanir call it *veig* (strong drink),
hreinalög (clear-brew), the Etins; *mjöð* (mead), the
 Hel-Wights;
 the sons of Suttung call it *sumbel* (ale-gathering).]

The exact recipes and methods that Viking Age Scandinavians used to produce *öl* are unknown. However, some brewing experts think that certain surviving ale-brewing practices in rural western Norway may preserve Viking Age techniques:

In the remote rural region of Voss most of the farmers make their own beer. When a new brew is underway, the smoke and rich odours tell everyone in the neighborhood that beer is being made and the go to the farmhouse to help out and then sample the finished brew. Jackson went out with farmer Svein Rivenes to collect juniper branches. Rivenes sawed sufficient branches to fill the 700-litre [about 185 gallons] bath-shaped tank in his cabin that acts as both the hot liquor vessel and the brew kettle. He feels, just as the medieval monks recorded by Urion and Eyer felt about the hops in their *bière*, that the juniper branches, complete with berries, helped him achieve a better extract from his malt as well as warding off infections.

His water source – a stream tumbling down the hillside outside his cabin – has a double use. It is his brewing

liquor and he also immerses sacks of barley in the stream where the grain starts to germinate. A neighbor has turned his garage into a kiln, powered by a domestic fan heater, and there barley is turned into malt. In the brewing process, when hot liquor has been added to the malt, the mash is filtered over more juniper branches to filter it. The berries give flavor to the wort – just as they do to gin and other distilled spirits – but Rivenes also adds hops when the wort is boiled. The yeast used in the Voss area has been handed down generation to generation and Rivenes thinks it may date back to Viking times. The farmer-brewers in Norseland start fermentation with a "totem stick" that carries yeast cells from one brew to the next.

The beer brewed by Svein Rivenes was, according to Michael Jackson, around nine or ten per cent alcohol and had a rich malt character, with a syrupy body, a pronounced juniper character and was clean and appetizing. Jackson brought a sample of the yeast back to Britain.... The Viking yeast was classified as a traditional ale yeast, *Saccharomyces cerevisiae*, but was different in several ways to a modern ale yeast. It had different taste characteristics. It was multi-strain whereas most modern ale yeasts are single or two-strain. Modern yeasts have been carefully cultured to attack different types of sugar in the wort and, where a beer is cask conditioned, to encourage a powerful secondary fermentation....

It is unlikely that a genuine Viking ale was brewed from pale malt: until the industrial revolution and commercial coal mining, malt was kilned over wood fires and was brown and often scorched and smoky in character, though the habit in Scandinavia of drying malt in saunas may have made it paler. (Protz, p. 25-26)



As well as juniper, Germans and Scandinavians were known to add a variety of herbal agents or *gruits* to their ales to produce bitterness or add other flavors, to disinfect and thus extend the "shelf life" of the product, and to add medicinal qualities to the drink in some cases (Protz, p. 20, La Pensée, pp.128-144). Hops was one such additive, being used in Viking Age Denmark and in tenth century Jorvik (modern York, England) and probably elsewhere in Scandinavia during the Viking Age (Hagen, pp. 210, 211; Roesdahl, p. 119). Hops, when boiled with the wort in the process of making ale, releases bitter acids, which both bitter the brew and add antibiotic properties that allow for better preservation of ale. Other herbal additives included alecost (*Chrysanthemum balsamita*), alehoof (also known as ground ivy, *Glechoma hederacea*), bog myrtle (also known as sweet gale, *Myrica gale*, especially used in Denmark, northern Germany and in England), horehound (*Marrubium vulgare*, called *Berghopfen* or "mountain hops" in Germany, where it was used as a hops substitute), yarrow (*Achillea*

millefolium) and others (La Pensée, pp.128-144, Hagen, p. 212).



Viking Age silver drinking bowl from Lilla Valla, Sweden

The drinking of ale was particularly important to several seasonal religious festivals, of which the Viking Scandinavians celebrated three: the first occurring after harvest, the second near midwinter, and the last at midsummer. These festivals continued to be celebrated after the introduction of Christianity, although under new names. Historical records show that ale consumption at these festivals, even in Christian times, was quite important: the *Gulaping Law* required farmers in groups of at least three to brew ale to be consumed at obligatory ale-feasts on All Saints (November 1 - Winternights), Christmas (December 25 - Yule), and upon the feast of St. John the Baptist (June 24 - Midsummer). More ordinary festivities, celebrated even today, are so closely associated with beer that they are known as *öl* ("ale") and include *Gravöl* (a wake, or "funeral ale"), *Barnöl* (a christening, or "child-ale") and *taklagsöl* (a barn-raising, or "roofing-ale") (Nylén, p. 57).

In chapter 12 of *Hákonar saga Góða* (The Saga of King Hákon the Good) in *Heimskringla*, it is quite evident that Hákon, who practiced his own Christianity in secret, was beginning through legislation to move the traditional holiday ale-feast as part of a campaign to eventually convert the country:

He had it established in the laws that the Yule celebration was to take place at the same time as is the custom with the Christians. And at that time everyone was to have ale for the celebration from a measure (Old Norse *mál*) of grain, or else pay fines, and had to keep the holidays while the ale lasted. (*Heimskringla*, pp. 106)

Brewing was usually the work of women in medieval Iceland, and probably in the Viking Age throughout Scandinavia as well:

Requiring fire and the warmth of the kitchen, brewing was allowed even during the Christmas holiday. Traditionally, women have been associated with this work and it remained a female task throughout the medieval period. In one of the heroic sagas a king resolved the jealousy between his two wives by deciding to keep the one who presented him with the better beer on his return from war. As late as the end of the fourteenth century a laysister was

superintendent of brewing in Vadstena, a Swedish monastery that accommodated men and women. Describing a brewing in honor of Bishop Páll, a vignette states specifically that the housewife was in charge. On important farms the physical work needed for large quantities may have demanded male help, as suggested from a brief glimps of the farm, at Stafaholt where the female housekeeper (*húsfreyja*), assisted by the male manager (*ræðismaðr*), replenished the stores of beer depleted by the visit of fourteen unexpected guests. Consumed at the *alþingi*, beer was commonly brewed on the spot, but there the quantities demanded and the scarcity of women made it a male task. Mentioned rarely in the sagas, brewing was a difficult process and occasionally required divine assistance mediated through miracles credited to Icelandic bishops (Jochens, p. 127).

Perhaps the most expensive and least available fermented beverage of the Viking Age was wine. Almost no grape wines were produced in Scandinavia, and only a very small amount of fruit wines, which by the Middle Ages was exclusively reserved for sacramental use. Birch-sap might also have been used to make limited quantities of wine (Hagen, p. 229). Instead, grape wine was exported from the Rhineland, which may have used the market towns of Hedeby and Dorestad as the export outlets for wine (Hagen, p. 220; Roesdahl, p. 120). Remains of wine amphoræ have been found at Dorestad and at Jorvik: these amphoræ varied in size from 14-24" tall and 12.5-20" in diameter (Hagen, p. 220).



Rhenish Amphora

Archaeological sleuthing has also led to the discovery that wine was imported in barrels as well: silver fir does not grow in Denmark, yet well-linings of this wood have been found at Hedeby and Dorestad, the wood having originated as barrels filled with wines, then imported from the Rhine into Denmark (Hagen, p. 220; Roesdahl, p. 122). Accordingly, wine would have been reserved for the wealthy and powerful. This is illustrated in *Ælfric's Colloquy*, where after the novice has answered that he prefers to drink ale, the questioner asks him does he not drink wine? The novice answers:

*lc ne eom swa spedig þæt ic mæge bicgean me win;
ond win nys drenc cilda ne dysgra, ac ealdra ond
wisra.*

I am not so wealthy that I may buy myself wine; and wine is not the drink of children or fools, but of the old and wise.

It is no surprise, therefore, that the chief of the Norse gods, Óðinn, drank only wine, as we see in the Eddaic poem *Grímnismál*, verse 19:

*Gera ok Freka seðr gunntamiðr
hróðigr Herjaföður;
en við vin eitt vopngöfugr
Óðinn æ lifir.*

War-accustomed Warrior-Father
Feeds it to Geri and Freki,
For on wine alone weapon-good
Óðinn always lives.

The most ancient Germanic alcoholic drink was probably mead (Old Norse *mjöd*, Old English *medo*, ultimately cognate with the Sanskrit word for "honey"). Mead was the idealized beverage of the old heroic poetry:

Mead was for the great and grand occasions, for the temple and the ceremonial; ale was for the masses and for all times (Gayre and Papazian, p. 88).

An explanation of the brewing of mead in the Viking Age must start with a short discussion of early apiculture. Early beekeeping in Northern Europe was usually based in *skeps*, coiled domes of straw that give us our iconographic visual representation of a "beehive" even today. Unlike modern removable-frame hives, *skep* beekeeping required that the bees be killed to remove the comb and honey, by smoking the hive over a fire with sulfur, or by drowning the hive, bees and all. The earliest archaeological remains of *skep* apiculture comes from the Anglo-Norse town of Jorvik, modern York (Reddy, "Skep FAQ").



For a typical *skep*, 6-8 combs would hang vertically, being attached to the top and sides.



**Skep, viewed from beneath
with combs in place**

First the beekeeper would cut out the combs containing only honey, then next would be removed the comb containing brood and finally any remaining odds and ends of wax. Honey was extracted from the comb by being placed in a cloth bag and allowing the comb to drain, then more honey of lesser quality was removed by wringing. Finally, the crushed refuse of the combs, the raided skep, and the cloth bag would be steeped or gently heated in water to dissolve out the honey. Once this liquid was strained, it was used as the basis for the production of mead (Reddy, "Skep FAQ"; Hagen, p. 230).

This method of washing honeycomb and the other items left from the extraction of honey to yield a solution of honey-water is described in Riddle 25 of the *Exeter Book*, whose answer is "mead":

*Ic eom weorð werum, / wide funden,
brungen of bearwum / ond of burghleoþum,
of denum ond of dunum. / Dægæs mec wægum
feþre on lifte, / feredon mid liste
under hrofes hleo. / Hæleð mec sibþan
bapedan in bydene. / Nu ic eom bindere
ond swingere, / sona weorpe
esne to eorþan, / hwilum ealdne ceorl.
Sona þæt onfindeð, / se þe mec fehð ongean,
ond wið mægenþisan / minre genæsteð,
þæt he hrycge sceal / hrusan secan,
gif he unrædes / ær ne geswiced,
strengo bistolen, / strong on spræce,
mægene binumen – / nah his modes geweald,
fota ne folma. / Frige hwæt ic hatte,
ðe on eorþan swa / esnas binde,
dole æfter dyntum / be dægæs leohte.*

I am man's treasure, taken from the woods,
Cliff-sides, hill-slopes, valleys, downs;
By day wings bear me in the buzzing air,
Slip me under a sheltering roof-sweet craft.
Soon a man bears me to a tub. Bathed,
I am binder and scourge of men, bring down
The young, ravage the old, sap strength.
Soon he discovers who wrestles with me
My fierce body-rush-I roll fools
Flush on the ground. Robbed of strength,
Reckless of speech, a man knows no power
Over hands, feet, mind. Who am I who bind

Men on middle-earth, blinding with rage
Fools know my dark power by daylight?

By the Middle Ages, especially in England, many taxes, guild fees, penalties and fines were due in payment of honey. This suggests that the wealthy and powerful – kings, noblemen, the Church, guilds – would have plenty of good-quality honey with which to make an even better mead than the basic one made from the washings of the comb (Hagen, p. 230). Certainly the serving of mead is shown in the literature as the duty and prerogative of kings.



The drinking of ale required vessels in which to serve the beverage. The oldest mode of serving beer was to offer it in a large bowl, often a brass cauldron in which the beer had been heated, or a bucket, from which everyone served themselves by means of small bird-shaped dippers called *Öl-gass* or "ale-geese." In *Lokásenná* we are given a description of such a beer-cauldron in the god Aegir's hall. Later Scandinavians drew their beer from the vat into *tapskalar* or "tap-bowls," which were like pitchers, provided with a short pouring spout or lip. *Tapskalar* were then emptied into pitchers or large tankards, which were set upon the tables and used to serve beer into individual drinking vessels.

The drinking vessels themselves could be of varied types. The most primitive were simple cones made of rolled birch or rowan bark.



**Viking Age Drinking Horns
from Söderby-Karl, Sweden**

Carefully polished horns were used. These were often adorned with precious metals and jewelry-work at mouth and point. The drinking horn has become known as the only Viking drinking vessel to modern folk, however there is evidence that horns were reserved for high-status usage for rituals such as offering a stirrup-cup, the various *öl* festivities and seasonal celebrations, and the formal ale-feast of *sumbel*:

It seems that to be offered alcohol in a horn was a mark of status, although – the many references to

drinking horns in heroic literature apart – clearer evidence comes from later sources including the Middle English romance of *King Horn*. At her bridal feast a king's daughter is carrying a ceremonial drinking horn round to the guests, but when she is accosted by a man she thinks is a beggar, she offers him instead drink in a large bowl as being more fitting to his condition.... Horns were the ceremonial drinking vessel for those of high status all through the period (Hagen, p. 243).

It is possible that some horns were carved with simple incised lines. Scholars commenting on the highly sculptural horns of the High Middle Ages in Scandinavia note that in rural regions of Norway an older tradition of drinking horn ornamentation survived:

"Most Norwegian drinking horns preserved from the Middle Ages belong to the goldsmith's art, since most of the various kinds or ornamentation are found on the metal mountings, while the horns themselves are smooth and unornamented. The known carvings are relatively late, and almost all of them have a simple, incised ornamentation that classifies them as folk art. They were, in fact, carved in Norwegian rural districts, and the style of the carving is retarded, making it difficult to establish if the horns are actually from the Middle Ages. The ornamentation is dominated by the Romanesque twining stems and leaves." (Magerøy, p. 70).



Glass drinking vessels were an important luxury import in Scandinavia. Perhaps most imported glassware came from the Rhine region, comprising tall beakers and small jars and flasks in light blue, green, or brown glass which was often decorated with applied or marvered trailing.

Glassware unique in design that was produced for the Scandinavian market includes glass drinking horns, claw beakers (drinking glasses which have applied glass trails on the sides that resemble "claws"), and funnel beakers (so named for their shape), and bag beakers (drinking glasses with rounded bottoms shaped something like a bag).



Claw Beaker



Funnel Beaker from Birka

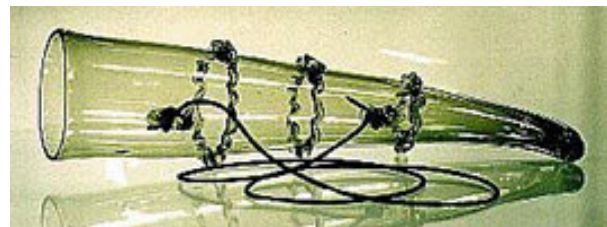
Glass drinking vessels were known in Old Norse as *Hrimkaldar*, or "frost-cups". The funnel beakers, which averaged 5" in height, became the most prevalent type of glass drinking vessel by the 10th century.



Glass tumbler from Birka



Glass "drinking horn" from Östra Varv Sweden



Modern commercially available glass "drinking horn"



Bag Beaker from Birka



Mold-blown green glass bag beaker

No less ceremonial than the drinking vessel itself was the mode of serving. The sagas often tell of the first round of drink (at least) being served by noble women. An excellent example occurs in this passage from the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf*, lines 607-641:

*þa wæs on salum sinces brytta,
gamolfeax ond gudrof; geoce gelyfde
brego Beorht-Dena, gehyrde on Beowulfe
folces hyrde fæstrædne gepoht.
Ðær wæs hæleþa hleahtor, hlyn swynsode,
word wæron wynsume. Eode Wealhþeow forð,
cwen Hroðgares, cynna gemyndig,
grette goldhroden guman on healle,
ond þa freolic wif ful gesealde
ærest East-Dena epelwearde,
bæd hine bliðne æt þære beorþege,
leodum leofne; he on lust geþeah
symbol ond seleaf, sigerof kyning.
Ymbeode þa ides Helminga
duguþe ond geogobe dæl æghwylcne,
sincfato sealde, op þæt sæl alamp
þæt hio Beowulfe, beaghroden cwen
mode gepungen medoful ætbær;
grette Geata leod, Gode þancode
wisfæst wordum þæs ðe hire se willa gelamp,
þæt heo on ænigne eorl gelyfde
fyrena frofre. He þæt ful geþeah,*

*wæltreow wiga, æt Wealhþeow,
ond þa gyddode guþe gefysed,
Beowulf maþelode, bearn Ecgþeowes:
'Ic þæt hogode, þa ic on holm gestah,
sæbat gesæt mid minra secga gedriht,
þæt ic anunga eowra leoda
willan geworhte, opðe on wæl crunge
feondgrapum fæst. Ic gefremman sceal
eorlic ellen, opðe endedæg
on þisse meoduhealle minne gebidan!
Ðam wife þa word wel licodon,
gilpcwide Geates; eode goldhroden,
freolicu folccwen to hire frean sittan.*

[Joyous then was the Jewel-giver,
hoar-haired, war-brave; help awaited
the Bright-Danes' prince, from Beowulf hearing,
folk's good shepherd, such firm resolve.
Then was laughter of liegemen loud resounding
with winsome words. Came Wealhtheow forth,
queen of Hrothgar, heedful of courtesy,
gold-decked, greeting the guests in hall;
and the high-born lady handed the cup
first to the East-Danes' heir and warden,
bade him be blithe at the beer-carouse,
the land's beloved one. Lustily took he
banquet and beaker, battle-famed king.
Through the hall then went the Helmings' Lady,
to younger and older everywhere
carried the cup, till come the moment
when the ring-graced queen, the royal-hearted,
to Beowulf bore the beaker of mead.
She greeted the Geats' lord, God she thanked,
in wisdom's words, that her will was granted,
that at last on a hero her hope could lean
for comfort in terrors. The cup he took,
hardy-in-war, from Wealhtheow's hand,
and answer uttered the eager-for-combat.
Beowulf spoke, bairn of Ecgtheow:--
"This was my thought, when my thanes and I
bent to the ocean and entered our boat,
that I would work the will of your people
fully, or fighting fall in death,
in fiend's gripe fast. I am firm to do
an earl's brave deed, or end the days
of this life of mine in the mead-hall here."
Well these words to the woman seemed,
Beowulf's battle-boast. -- Bright with gold
the stately dame by her spouse sat down.]



Remains of Wooden Cup

The serving of ale in the manner described by the *Beowulf* poet was not a servant's task, but a

jealously guarded privilege accorded to the highest-ranking Germanic women. The poet is careful to establish the birth, character, and queenly attributes of Hrothgar's queen (Enright, p. 6). Another Old English poem, *Maxims I*, also emphasizes that this ceremonial serving of drink was an important duty expected of any noble Anglo-Saxon woman (lines 83b-92):

... *Guð sceal in eorle,
wig geweaxan, / ond wif geþeon
leof mid hyre leodum, / leohtmod wesan,
rune healdan, / rumheort beon
mearum ond maþmum, / meodorædenne
for gesiðmægen / symle æghwær
eodor æþelinga / ærest gegretan,
forman fulle / to frean hond
ricene geræcan, / ond him ræd witan
boldagendum / bæm ætsomne.*

[... War-spirit shall be in the earl
his courage increase. And his wife shall flourish
loved by her people, light-hearted she should be,
she should keep secrets, be generous
with mares and mighty treasures. At mead-drinking
before the band of warriors / she shall serve the
sumble,

To the protector of princes approach earliest,
Place the first *full* in the lord's hand
As the ruler reaches out. And she must know what
advice to give him
As joint master and mistress of the house together.]

This ceremony of the queen serving the ceremonial drink is part of a ritual that confirms the king's rulership and cements the social order of the king's followers. The order in which each is served shows relative rank between the participants, with the king coming first, then men of higher rank, and finally the youngest and lowest ranking. The sharing of the cup helps establish bonds between the men as well.



Reconstruction of drinking horn from Århus

The first step in the ceremony of *sumbel* was the formal presentation of the cup to the king or lord of the hall by the highest-ranking woman present. It is thought to be likely that formal types of declarations were made with this presentation. For example, in *Beowulf*, lines 1168b-1174:

... *Spræc ða ides Scyldinga:
'Onfoh þissum fulle, freodrihten min,
sinces brytta! þu on sælum wes,
goldwine gumena, ond to Geatum spræc
mildum wordum, swa sceal man don!
Beo wið Geatas glæd, geofena gemyndig,
nean ond feorran þu nu hafast.'*

... The Scylding queen spoke:
'Quaff of this cup, my king and lord,
breaker of rings! And blithe be you,
gold-friend of men; to the Geats here speak
such words of mildness as man should use!
Be glad with thy Geats; of those gifts be mindful,
or near or far, which you now have.'

Here the queen formally points out the lord's rank by calling him *freodrihten min*, "my king and lord", and re-emphasizes his role as *goldwine gumena*, "gold-friend of men, giver of treasure," establishing his role as ruler and benefactor before the witnessing warband and guesting Geats. It is a formal declaration of Hrothgar's status as king.

The presentation of ale during the Viking Age might be accompanied with words such as these from the Eddaic poem *Sigurðrífumál*:

*Bjór færi ek þér, brynþings apaldr,
magni blandinn ok megintíri,
fullr er hann ljóða ok líknstafa,
góðra galdra ok gamanrúna.*

Bjórr I fetch to you, bold warrior,
With might blended and bright fame,
The *full* is strong with songs and healing-staves,
With goodly chants, wish-speeding runes.

Again, the declaration of status is made, in this case with the *valkyrja* acknowledging a warrior. Where Queen Wealhtheow imbued her cup with happiness, kind words and gladness, the *valkyrja* Sigðrifa offers the things most desired by a warrior: strength, glory and magical healing.

Yet another example is recorded involving the presentation of ale to King Vortigern by Rowan, the daughter of the Saxon leader Hengist, as recorded by Geoffrey of Monmouth in chapter 12 of his *History of the Kings of Britain*:

The king readily accepted of his invitation, but privately, and having highly commended the magnificence of the structure, enlisted the men into his service. Here he was entertained at a royal banquet; and when that was over, the young lady came out of her chamber bearing a golden cup full of wine, with which she approached the king, and making a low courtesy, said to him, "*Lauerd king wacht heil!*" The king, at the sight of the lady's face, was on a sudden both surprised and inflamed with her beauty; and calling to his interpreter, asked him what she said, and what answer he should make her. "She called you, 'Lord king,'" said the interpreter, "and offered to drink

your health. Your answer to her must be, '*Drinc heil!*' Vortigern accordingly answered, "*Drinc heil!*" and bade her drink; after which he took the cup from her hand, kissed her, and drank himself. From that time to this, it has been the custom in Britain, that he who drinks to any one says, "*Wacht heil!*" and he that pledges him, answers "*Drinc heil!*"

The Saxon Rowan's offering the drink first to Vortigern, and proclaiming him "lord king" again shows the Germanic pattern of the high-ranking noble woman establishing precedence and rank by the ceremonial serving of strong drink.

The importance of this drinking ritual throughout the Germanic world is attested in the archaeological record as well. Beginning in the early Migration Age and continuing down throughout the Viking Age, graves of women whose jewelry and accoutrements proclaim them wealthy and noble also contain the equipment needed for the ritual of serving drink. Germanic Roman Iron Age graves such as the one from Juellinge contain elaborate drinking gear:

... in her right hand she held a long-handled bronze wine-strainer. Among other grave goods were found glass beakers and drinking horn together with a ladle into which the strainer held by the dead woman fit. Both instruments were commonly used in ladling drink from a cauldron (also found in the grave) into beaker or horn ... Analysis of the cauldron showed that it had contained a fermented liquid made from barley and fruit (Enright, p. 101).



Ladle and Drinking Bowl Set, Norway



Drinking Set, 10th century Lejre Find

Grave finds of elaborate drinking equipment in female graves are in evidence in all pagan Germanic societies, including that of the Vikings:

In Viking Age cemeteries, the combination of the bucket-container for distribution together with long-handled sieve and drinking horn or cup remains very common... (Enright, pp. 103-104)

Old Norse representational art also focuses on the woman-as-cupbearer. There are a wide variety of so-called "valkyrie amulets" and runestone depictions where a richly-clad woman is shown ceremoniously bearing a drinking horn high.



Viking Age representations of the noble lady ceremoniously serving drink

After the drink was formally presented first to the king or ruler, next the noblewoman serving the drink would offer it, according to rank, to the warriors who were oath-bound to the ruler. This had one role as a part of a communal bonding rite that forged the lord's warriors into a band of brothers, but the primary purpose of the noblewoman's serving the drink with her own hands to the oath-bound men had legal and religious significance in Germanic culture establishing relative rank and mutual obligations between the king and his warband (Enright, p. 10). As did the formal March of Precedence in later medieval society, the rite of *sumbel* served in Germanic cultures to define, emphasize, and enforce the acknowledged hierarchy and ranking of a lord's followers.



Part of a 5-piece set of silver drinking bowls from the 10th century Terslev hoard.

After the initial, formal, meaningful serving of drink by the queen or noblewoman, the revelers would later be served by other men or women who *se þe on handa bæR hroden ealowæge, / scencte scir wered* "carried the carved cup in hand, served the clear mead" (*Beowulf* ll. 495-496a). After the first round of formal drinking, the rite changed in focus somewhat, focusing more on companionship and bonding among the participants.

The gods themselves had the Valkyries as cupbearers, as these named by Óðinn in *Grímnismál* 36:

*Hrist ok Mist / vil ek at mér horn beri,
Skeggjöld ok Skögul, / Hildr ok Þrúðr,
Hlökk ok Herfjötur, / Göll ok Geirólul,
Randgríðr ok Ráðgríðr / ok Reginleif;
þær bera Einherjum öl.*

Hrist and Mist the horn shall bear me,
Skeggjöld and Skögul, Hildr and Þrúðr,
Hlökk and Herfjötur, Göll and Geirólul,
Randgríðr and Ráðgríðr and Reginleif
To the *einherjar* ale shall bear.

Once the Vikings had their cups filled, they offered up toasts, or *fulls*. The first full was assigned to Óðinn, and was made for victory and the king's success. Snorri Sturluson gives Jarl Sigurðr's first toast at a festival at Hlaðir in 952 as an example in chapter 17 of *Hákonar saga Góða*:

... Jarl Sigurðr proposed a toast, dedicating the horn to Óðinn, and drank to the king. The king took the horn from him and made the sign of the cross over it.

Then Kár of Gryting said, "Why does the king do that? Doesn't he want to drink of the sacrificial beaker?"

Jarl Sigurðr made answer, "The king does as all do who believe in their own might and strength, and dedicated his beaker to Thórr. He made the sign of the hammer over it before drinking. (*Heimskringla*, pp. 110-111)

Since Sigurðr's glib explanation was readily accepted, it may be that making a symbol in commemoration of the Hammer of the god Thórr over drink was, while not common, certainly acceptable and practiced at least by some.

We learn more about the rounds of toasting from a description earlier in the saga in chapter 14, where the pagan Sigurðr and his people celebrate Yule:

The sacrificial beaker was to be borne around the fire, and he who made the feast and was chieftain was to bless the beaker as well as all the sacrificial meat. Óðinn's toast was to be drunk first – that was for victory and power to the king – then Njörðr's and Freyr's, for good harvests and for peace. Following that many used to drink a beaker to the king. Men drank toasts also in memory of departed kinsfolk – that was called *minni*. (*Heimskringla*, pp. 107)

The Old Norse term *minni* is literally "memory," but came to be used to indicate "a memorial cup or toast." Apparently the term could also refer to all the *fulls* drunk at the *sumbel*:

... these memorial cups or toasts were in the heathen age consecrated (*signuð*) to the gods Thórr, Óðinn, Bragi, Freyr, Njörðr, who, on the introduction of

Christianity, were replaced by Christ, the Saints, the Archangel Michael, the Virgin Mary, and St. Olaf; the toasts to the Queen, Army, etc. in [modern] English banquets are probably a relic of this ancient Teutonic ceremony... (Cleasby-Vigfusson p. 429 s.v. "*minni*")

The importance of this custom is partially attested by the many compounds of the word *minni* found in Old Norse:

minnis-drykkja, a banquet where there are *minni*
minnis-horn, a memorial horn or cup
minnis-veig, a toast-cup, a charmed cup
minnis-öl, literally "memory ale" but used in the sense of "an enchanted or charmed drink"

At weddings, the toasts offered might be slightly different. In *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs*, ch. 12 a different order of toasts is intertwined with the narrative:

... the memorial cup consecrated to Thórr was carried into the hall....

Next came the toast dedicated to all the gods....

... after that it was time for Óðinn's toast to be drunk....

When Óðinn's toast had been drunk, there was only one left, the toast dedicated to Freyja.

(Pálsson and Edwards, "Bosi and Herraud", pp. 80-81)

These rounds of toasting were a part of the custom of *sumbel* (Old Norse) or *symbel* (Old English). The origins of the word *sumbel* are unknown. Some scholars have theorized that the term was a borrowing of Latin *symbola*, itself from Greek *συμβολη* "collection for a meal." However, this term appears throughout Germanic cultures from a very early date, which would argue against its origins as a loan-word. Another possible etymology is a derivation from proto-Germanic *sum-* or *sam-* ("gathering together") and **alu* ("ale"). Using this etymology, *sumbel* would literally mean "an ale-gathering" (Bauschatz, p 76).

Toasts might be combined with vows or oaths, boasts, storytelling and song. More than one *sumbel* is encountered in Beowulf, and in Old Norse poetry such as *Lokásenná* verse 3 where Loki says:

Loki kvað:
Inn skal ganga / Ægis hallir í,
á þat sumbl at sjá;
jöll ok áfu / færi ek ása sonum,
ok blend ek þeim svá meini mjöð.

Loki said:
In shall I go, into Ægir's hall,
for that *sumble* I will see;
angelica in the drink I bring to the gods,
with harm shall I mix their mead.

Sumbel is even mentioned in Christian poetry such as "The Dream of the Rood," where it is told that "There are God's folk seated at *symbel*." The term

"*sumbel daeg*" came to be used in Old English to denote a Christian feast day.



Silver cup from Lejre, Denmark

The *sumbel* was a joint activity. Those participating came and sat together, usually within a chieftain's hall. It was often referred to as a drinking feast, where ale, beer or mead might be served in a ceremonial cup, and passed from hand to hand around the hall. The recipient of the cup made a toast, oath, or boast, or he might sing a song or recite a story before drinking and passing the cup along. While referred to as a "feast," the *sumbel* did not include food, but might precede or follow a meal. A *sumbel* was solemn in the sense of having deep significance and importance to the participants, but was not a grim or dour ceremony – indeed, at Hrothgar's *sumbel* in *Beowulf*, "...there was laughter of the men, noise sounded, the words were winsome."

However, as the quotes from *Hávamál* above clearly show, it was considered poor form to become drunk at the *sumbel*. Taking drink from the ceremonial cup might be thought of as symbolizing the divine inspiration given to Óðinn by the Mead of Poetry, and the Allfather had much to say in *Hávamál* about overdrinking:

"I counsel thee ...
I pray thee be wary ...
Be wariest of all with ale."
(from v. 131)

This is not to say that Óðinn was a prohibitionist: he himself drank only wine, and would not drink unless his blood brother Loki had also been served (giving rise to the custom of flicking a few drops of every toast raised to Óðinn into a fire to honor the covenant with Loki). It is also recorded that Óðinn drank each day with the goddess Saga in her hall.

Finally, as Foote and Wilson point out, while "the Vikings seem to have been men of some thirst," their

drink contained large quantities of impurities, and therefore they, too, were subject to "frightful hangovers..."

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Left: Imported Irish bucket of yew wood with enameled handle mount from the Oseberg ship burial. Right: Bucket of birch wood covered in metalwork.



Drinking bowls and horns shown in the Bayeux Tapestry