

Ceremonial Drinking in the Viking Age

Charles Riseley



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Det humanistiske fakultetet

Institutt for lingvistiske og nordiske studier

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Summary

Drinking ceremonies played a very important social role in Viking Age Scandinavia and Anglo-Saxon England. This thesis will seek to illuminate these ceremonies by following the terms *minni* and *bragarfull* through the sources, and special note will also be taken of source age in order to ascertain how the depiction of these ceremonies changes over time. First the seasonal feasts and their associated libations will be studied and their association with kingship, law, and *árs ok friðar* will be examined. Next we will look into funeral feasts and their memorial toasts which governed inheritance and the transfer of power. The Anglo-Saxon *mead-cup* ritual which served to stabilize society and foster group-cohesion will be examined, as will the Old Norse *mead-cup* analogues. Finally, the institution of vowing over toasts will be studied. In all of these traditions, the theme of alcohol as a strong social-stabilizer and a vehicle of social development is stressed.

Contents

Summary.....	i
Contents.....	ii
Introduction.....	1
Historiography.....	3
Key Terms.....	4
Seasonal Feasts and Sacral Kingship.....	5
Funeral Feasts and Toasts.....	13
Anglo-Saxon Toasting and Boasting.....	19
Conclusion.....	31
Bibliography.....	38

Introduction

The ceremonial consumption of alcohol played an important role in the social landscape of Viking Age Scandinavia, where it framed some of the most important gatherings and rituals. One need only take a glance at the Norse myths to see the prominent place that alcohol held in the Early Medieval mindset. In Snorri's *Edda*¹, the men in Odin's Valhalla are furnished with an endless supply of drink from the great goat Heiðrún, whose udders run with mead, and Odin himself does not even deign to eat, but lives solely on wine (41-43). In the myth of Kvasir, we see a close association of alcohol, wisdom, and poetry. Kvasir, the wisest man in the world, is killed and his blood is turned into the Mead of Poetry, a substance which gives its drinker the gift of verse and wisdom (80-81). We also see Thor competing in a mighty drinking contest (55), and—in another source—questing for a kettle large enough to brew ale for a divine feast (Neckel 88). Alcohol held a vital place in Asgard, a fact that reflects its importance to the people who told the myths.

It has been argued that there is an important link between the development of civilization and the production of alcohol², and such would certainly seem to be the case in ancient Scandinavia. In his investigation of the phenomenon, Bjørn Qviller takes as his starting point the Hobbesian theory of the natural state of man, that is, of *warre*, or a constant state of strife, one against the other. In such a state, the life of man is, "... solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short" (Qviller 4). After analyzing archaeological finds concerning ancient man, Qviller continues, saying, "... man in prehistoric times developed permanently reliable techniques for extracting sugar. This access to sugar enabled primeval man to overcome the shortage of intoxicating drinks and thereby the negative aspects of life in the Hobbesian state of nature" (4). Qviller is not talking about intoxication as an escape from the trials of life, but rather of alcohol as a social lubricant. Looking to the ancient Greeks, he explains, "... the Greeks and other Archaic peoples avoided the state of war of every man against every man, by letting all free men exchange drinks with all free men. The sharing of a common substance in the symposium³ becomes the dialectical opposite of war. The symposium expresses

1 The *Prose Edda* was written by Snorri Sturluson in Iceland in the early thirteenth-century, and comes to us in manuscripts from c.1300 and after (Faulkes vii).

2 See Bjørn Qviller's *Bottles and Battles* (2004), M. Dietler's "Driven by Drink" (1990), and Ronald Gorny's "Viticulture and Ancient Anatolia" (1996).

3 The Greek Symposium was a drinking party where men would gather to debate important issues or simply relax (*Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Greece and Rome* 408-9).

solidarity, alliance, peace, ... ” (5). He describes something key to the present study here, the sociable feelings that sharing drinks engenders. Such an atmosphere provides fertile ground for social development. Alcohol is, in Qviller's view, a purely social substance because:

... it is a phenomenon that is not related to the immediate reproduction of the peasant or aristocratic household. Their [fermented drinks] origin cannot be explained by the need for sustenance or with reference to the rationality of the producers. These products did not get a good price at market, simply because there was no market. Wine, mead, and beer were unnecessary for the maintenance of life, but vital for the display of authority and status (7).

Such a luxury item as alcohol did indeed carry with it the seed and the possibility for political consolidation and growth. Leaving the early Greeks, we turn our eyes to the north to see how Qviller's theory applies in the Scandinavian context.

It is difficult to trace the importance alcohol had in the early development of Scandinavian society, but its function and importance in the Viking Age can be readily explored. The elements stressed by Qviller—the social and political significance of alcohol, its ability to bring men together in an atmosphere of peaceful solidarity, and its function as a vehicle of political development—can be seen in the sources. The imbibing of alcohol is not seen as carefree as was the Greek symposium, but rather, it is presented as being a highly ritualized custom. Alcohol has become a sort of binding agent, a substance used to give extra weight to words and vows. It has also certainly become an important tool in the inventory of the powerful, for they have control over the ceremony. Describing large, great-hall structures, Stephen Pollington explains, “it is likely that these buildings housed the settlement's principal family, and this family's ownership of the largest available indoor space underscored its control of access to the formal, communal rites and observances: dominance of the settlement's social life would ensue” (20). Such ceremonies strengthened group solidarity, and put local leaders at the heart of both social and religious ritual. It is these rituals, their function, and their depiction, that this thesis will examine.

Historiography

Early Medieval and Viking Age drinking customs are not commonly researched topics, but a fair amount of scholarship does still surround them. Important entries to note are Wilhelm Grönbech's *The Culture of the Teutons* (1932), Maurice Cahen's *Etudes Sur Le Vocabulaire Religieux Du Vieux-scandinave: la libation* (1921), Jan de Vries' *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte I-II* (1935-1937), Stefán Einarsson's "Old English *Beot* and Old Icelandic *Heitstrenging*" (1934), and Levin Schücking's "Heldenstolz und Würde im Angelsächsischen" (1933). Building on these earlier works, scholars such as Olof Sundqvist, Michael Enright, and Bjørn Qviller have done great work furthering the field.

Sundqvist, in his book, *Freyr's Offspring* (2002), seeks to illuminate the role of sacral kingship in ancient and early Medieval Sweden. To achieve his goal, Sundqvist brings together a vast store of sources and scholarship pertaining to both ancient Scandinavian kingship and ancient religious practice. Ceremonial drinking rituals were associated with both kingship and religion, and thus Sundqvist makes a full account of them in his work. Professor of Medieval History Michael Enright covers ceremonial drinking extensively in his book, *Lady with a Mead Cup* (1996), which seeks to establish a connection between the ancient warlords and sibyls described by Tacitus in his *Germania* (ca. 98 A.D.), and the kings and queens of early Medieval Europe. Enright sees the *mead-cup* ritual as a custom that continued for roughly a thousand years, and provides a wealth of examples—both from written sources and archeology—of ceremonial drinking in Scandinavia, England, and mainland Europe⁴. Bjørn Qviller, who we have already met, seeks to place alcohol at the heart of early political organization. In his study, he focuses primarily on the ancient Greeks and on the early Medieval Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians. Although the medieval material in his book is listed simply as "comparative evidence," a lot can be learned from Qviller's meticulous research and methods.

The aim of this thesis is to ask, what were the key early medieval drinking ceremonies in Scandinavia and Anglo-Saxon England, and how did their depiction alter over time? Using the key terms *minni* and *bragarfull*, this investigation will study the different contexts in which ceremonial drinking is depicted in the primary sources, and how that depiction changes depending on the age of the source.

4 (Enright 126).

Key Terms

The Old Norse words *minni* and *bragarfull* describe the primary libations performed in Viking Age drinking ceremonies. The primary meaning of *minni* is “memory,” and thus a *minni* toast is a memorial toast. Cleasby, Vigfusson, and Craigie define the *minni* as, “II. *A memorial cup or toast*, at old sacrifices and banquets: these memorial toasts were in the heathen age consecrated (signuð) to the gods Thor, Odin, Bragi, Frey, Njord, who, on the introduction of Christianity, were replaced by Christ, the saints, the Archangel Michael, the Virgin Mary, and St. Olaf” (429). In the course of this investigation, examples of the “old sacrifices and banquets” will be examined, as will the ceremonies with which the toasts were given. It must be noted that some scholars doubt the authenticity of the term, arguing instead that it is a creation of the medieval saga-writers⁵. *Bragarfull*—sometimes rendered as *bragafull*—toasts were also delivered at funerals, but they were delivered elsewhere as well. *Bragarfull* is a combination of two words, *bragi* (best, foremost, or chief) and *full* (a goblet full of drink). When combined, *bragarfull* comes to mean “a toasting cup,” or “the king’s toast” (Cleasby 75). The term can mean either the cup itself in a concrete sense, or the abstract concept of the toast. These toasts were given by important men and often concerned big issues such as inheritance and vows of stately conduct.

Sumbl is also an important term to follow, as it is the name of the ceremonial feast where ritualized drinking often took place. *Sumbl* is simply defined as, “*banquet, symposium,*” but much more can be said (604). Paul Bauschatz, in his examination of the *sumbl* and early Germanic ritual, etymologically sees the word as a combination of *-sum* (collective gathering) and *ol* (ale), and thus defines *sumbl* as “gathering or coming together of ale” (76). *Sumbl* is a versatile word and can describe a wide range of occasions such as seasonal feasts and royal receptions. It is at the *sumbl* and the *erfi* (funeral feast) where most ceremonial drinking took place.

The terms ON *heitstrenging*, and OE *beotword* are also useful to remember, as these are the boasts that often accompany the *minni* and *bragarfull* toasts. ON *heitstrenging*—or *strengja heit*—means, “f. making a solemn vow,”⁶ and in Old English *beotword*⁷, meaning

5 See Düwel, *Das Opferfest von Lade* (1985).

6 (Zoëga 193).

7 OE *Gylpword*, *gilp*, *gilpcwide*, *gilpspræc*, and *dolgilp* also cover the same tradition (Einarsson 100 & 106).

“boast” or “a boastful speech”⁸. In these boasts we typically see men promise to achieve a feat—be it one of combat, endurance, or of physical or sexual prowess—in order to gain honor and glory. In some cases—such as Beowulf’s decision to face Grendel unarmed—the hero will even handicap himself so as to make his feat all the greater. These boasts were very solemn and not to be made lightly.

Seasonal Feasts and Sacral Kingship

One of the venues where ceremonial drinking played an important role was the pre-Christian seasonal feast of the pagan Scandinavians. These feasts—sometimes called *sumbl*—appear to have occurred three times annually, and to have involved sacrifice (*blót*) and libations (*full* and *minni*). It also seems that these feasts were overseen by local magnates or by the king himself, who appears to have been a sacral figure. These feasts are mentioned directly by Snorri in his *Ynglingasaga* and *Hákonar saga góða*, and more indirectly in the *Gulaping laws*, and in the account of the life of Ólaf Tryggvason given in *Ágrip*. We also find the feasts mentioned in the Eddic poems *Hymiskviða* and *Lokasenna*⁹.

Before moving into Snorri’s full accounts of the seasonal feasts, it is useful to take a look at what the other sources have to show us. The Eddic poems *Hymiskviða* and *Lokasenna*¹⁰ depict the gods themselves taking part in the seasonal *sumbl*. *Hymiskviða* tells the story of the Æsir’s wish to hold a *sumbl*, and of the quest to find a kettle large enough to brew the necessary ale. It begins by saying, “Ár valtívar veiðar námo, / oc sumblsamir, áðr saðir yrði; ...”¹¹ (Neckel 88). The poem then follows the exploits of Thor and Týr as they retrieve the necessary kettle from the giants and return it to the hall of Ægir for the feast, and ends by saying, “Þróttöflugr kom á þing goða / oc hafði hver, þannz Hymir átti; / enn véar

8 (Hall 42-3).

9 Seasonal feasts and their associated libations are also seen in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs*, and *Helgaqviða Hiorvarðzsonar*, both of which will be dealt with later.

10 Both *Hymiskviða* and *Lokasenna* are found in the Codex Regius manuscript, which was likely written in Iceland in the 1270s. The composition dates of the poems—and especially of the mythological poems—are thought to be much older, though. Many are thought to pre-date Christianity (ca.1000), but a more specific dating is very difficult to find (Larrington xi).

11 Once, the victory gods ate their catch from hunting, / they were keen to drink before they got enough; ... (Larrington 78)

hverian vel scolo drecca / qlðr at Ægis eitt hǫrmeitið”¹² (Neckel 95). We find the term *sumblsamir* (to feast or drink together) in the first quote, and the elements of drinking and winter in the second. According to Snorri, the three drinking festivals occur in early winter, midwinter, and midsummer (ÍF XXVI 20). The midwinter (*jól*) feast is especially well documented, appearing in *Ágrip* and *Hákonar saga góða*, among others.

The story of the divine *sumbl* continues in the poem *Lokasenna*, where the gods gather together to drink in Ægir's hall. The prose introduction connects the two poems¹³, and the term *sumbl*¹⁴ is used throughout. Here we have a picture of the gods at *sumbl*, but unfortunately, very few specifics are given—the gods offer each other famous mead (*maeran miaðar*)¹⁵ and crystal cups (*hrímkálki*)¹⁶, but that is about it. According to the ending of *Hymiskviða* and the prose introduction of *Lokasenna*, the *sumbl* appears to be happening in the winter, and the gods are gathered together to drink, but the bulk of the poem follows the insults thrown back and forth between Loki and the Æsir, and does not go into ritual detail. We will leave *Lokasenna* for now, but will return to it further on when describing the *mead-cup* ritual.

Ágrip and the *Gulaping laws* also bear witness to the old seasonal drinking festivals. *Ágrip* is a short history of the kings of Norway who reigned from the late ninth-century to the early-twelfth. The text was likely composed in Norway in c.1190, but comes to us in a single Icelandic manuscript from the first half of the thirteenth century (Driscoll xii and ix). The text describes the efforts of Óláfr Tryggvason to Christianize Norway, one aspect of which was the abolition of pagan feast days. It says, “... ok reisti fyrst kirkjur á sjálf(s) síns hǫfuðbólum ok felldi blót ok blótdrykkjur ok lét í stað koma í vild við lýðinn hátíðadrykkjur jóla ok páska, Jóansmessu mungát ok haustöl at Míkjálmessu”¹⁷ (ÍF XXIX 22). This passage shows the importance that seasonal feasts had, for Óláfr would not have bothered making replacement

12 The mighty one came to the assembly of the gods, / bringing the kettle which Hymir had owned; / and the gods are going joyfully to drink / ale at Ægir's every winter (Larrington 83).

13 Ægir, er ǫðro nafni hét Gymir, hann hafði búit ásom ǫl, þá er hann hafði fengit ketil inn micla, sem nú er sagt (Neckel 96).

14 For instance: Loki qvað: / 'Inn skal ganga Ægis hallir í, / á þat sumbl at síá; / iǫll oc áfo færi ec ása sonum, / oc blend ec þeim svá meini miðð' (Neckel 97).

15 Sixth stanza.

16 Fifty-second stanza.

17 He first raised churches on his own estates and he abolished pagan feasts and sacrifices, in place of which, as a favour to the people, he ordained the holiday feasts of Yule and Easter, St John's Mass ale and an autumn-ale at Michaelmas (Driscoll 31-33).

Christian feasts if the old pagan ones were not so deeply entrenched in local life and culture. The winter festival of *jól* (yule), it will be noted, is among the holidays established. Drinking is seen as the key element in these feasts, as the terms *blótdrykkjur* and *hátiðadrykkjur* illustrate. *Blótdrykkjur* can be understood as “pagan drinking,” and similarly, *hátiðadrykkjur* can be seen as “holiday drinking.” Clearly, the alcoholic element of these feasts has not changed, although it seems that the divinities which they honor have. Another example of Christian drinking customs that likely find their origin in pagan ritual can be found in the *Guláping laws*¹⁸. Law six says:

Þat er nu því nefnt at ver hafum olgerð heitit. Þat kalla men samburðar ol. Mæles ol boande. En annat husprena. Gera bondr .iii. Samen hit fæsta. Nema svautarla bui i eniu. Æða sva ofarla a fíalle at eigi megi olgerð sina fora til annarra manna. Þa scal hann iammikit ol gera einnsamann En so er minna a en ser kua bu. Æða ser sallda sað. Þa scal hann því at eins ol gera. Ef hann vill. Þat ol skal gort vëra firi allra heilagra messu hit seinsta. En þat ol scal signa til krist þacca. Oc sancta Mariu. Til árs. Oc til friðar (Keyser 6).¹⁹

Here we have a law requiring citizens to combine efforts to brew ale for seasonal feasts. These ale feasts (*olgerð*), or “neighborhood ale” (*samburðar ol*), seem to have been very important to have warranted their own law. This law is not arbitrary and easy to casually shrug off, for it includes punitive fines for those who fail to contribute their allotted ale (6). This ale is to be dedicated to Christ and the virgin Mary in thanks for—and one guesses to secure another—year of *árs ok friðar*. This formulaic expression, which means “for the fertility of the crops and peace,” is one that comes up repeatedly in the study of seasonal feasting. We see the *Guláping law* echoed in Snorri's *Hákonar saga góða*²⁰ when he describes Hákon's first attempts to Christianize Norway, saying, “Hann setti þat í lögum at hefja

18 The Gula Þing was a representative assembly in south-western Norway. The origin of the Guláping is impossible to date, but it is possible that it initially formed around sacrificial festivals in honor of Njord, the pagan sea god (Larson 7). The oldest copy of the written *Guláping law* comes from c.1150, but it appears that many of the laws that it records come from much, much, earlier (26). The most complete copy of the *Guláping laws* comes from the Codex Ranzowianus, which appears to have been produced in the mid-thirteenth century (29).

19 Now the next is this, that we have promised an ale feast, such as men call a “neighborhood ale”; [there shall be] ale from one measure of malt for each freeman and another for his wife. And let three householders at the fewest give the ale in common, unless they live so far out among the isles or or so high up on the mountain side that they are not able to bring their brewing to the homes of other men; in such cases they shall brew as much ale singly ... [as would be their share]. But if a man occupies a farm supporting fewer than six cows or [needing] less than six sálds of seed grain he shall give the ale feast only if he wishes to. ... This ale shall be given before the mass of All Saints at the latest. The ale shall be blessed with thanks to Christ and Saint Mary for peace and a fruitful harvest; ... (Larson 39-40).

20 *Hákonar saga góða* describes the reign of king Hákon Haraldsson (c. 920-961). A more detailed and critical examination of Snorri and his *Heimskringla*—the compilation in which we find *Hákonar saga góða*—will follow shortly.

jólahald þann tíma sem kristnir menn, ok skyldi þá hverr maðr eiga mælis ǫl, en gjalda fé ella, ok halda heilagt, meðan ǫl ynnisk”²¹ (ÍF XXVI 166). Here we have roughly the same law described—men were all required to brew ale for a seasonal feast, or else pay fines for their negligence. As we shall soon see, this law also connected to the notion of *árs ok friðar*.

As mentioned before, the custom of seasonal feasts is almost intrinsically tied to the figures who officiate them, the local magnates and the sacral kings. To fully understand seasonal drinking festivals, we must also understand ancient Scandinavian sacral kingship. A brief summary of Åke Ström's classic article “The King God and his Connection with Sacrifice in Old Norse Religion,” provides a good starting point for a look at Scandinavian Sacral Kingship. Citing *Ynglingasaga*, *Hákonar saga góða*, and *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs*, Ström establishes the king as the central practitioner in pagan religious ceremony who was expected to lead out in sacrifice (703). The king was both a sacrificer (*blótgoði*) and a receiver of sacrifice. Local leaders, such as *jarls* and *goðar*, also performed cultic functions, because “in Old Norse time there is no difference between a state official and a priest” (704)²². These leaders were to hold feasts three times annually, the purpose of which was to secure victory in battle—*til sigrs*—and good harvests and peace—*til árs ok friðar*. In summary, both the king and his local magnates functioned as both religious and secular leaders, men whose responsibility it was to offer sacrifice to ensure the welfare of their followers; nowhere else are their actions more clearly depicted and explained than in the works of Snorri Sturluson.

Snorri, the great 13th century Icelandic scholar, poet, and diplomat, records the lives of fourteen Norwegian kings in his *Heimskringla*. Snorri's description of the early kings of Scandinavia provides a wealth of information, but many scholars have called it into question. One argument is that Snorri does not record actual pagan ceremonies, but rather repackages rituals and themes from medieval Christendom to hock as ancient ritual²³. Scholars such as

21 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 of grain, or else pay fines, and had to keep the holidays while the ale lasted (Hollander 106).

22 Such is seen in *Hákonar saga góða*, where local chieftains could serve as intermediaries between the gods and man as well and officiate the seasonal festivals. “Helt Sigurðr jarl upp blótveizlum ǫllum af hendi konungs þar í Þrændalǫgum” (ÍF XXVI 167). Here we see local chieftains as leaders of the cult in the king's name.

23 See Klaus Düwel, *Das Opferfest von Lade. Quellenkritische Untersuchungen zur germanischen Religionsgeschichte* (1985), and E. Walter, “Quellenkritisches und Wortgeschichtliches zum Opferfest von Hlaðir in Snorris Heimskringla (Hák. Góð. c. 17)” (1966).

Otter Grønvik²⁴ and Olof Sundqvist²⁵ disagree, however, and give Snorri credence. This thesis will follow the latter train of thought. Snorri's sagas that will be covered here are *Ynglingasaga*, *Hákonar saga góða*, and *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, all of which come from *Heimskringla*, a history of the kings of Norway. It is hard to gauge when exactly Snorri composed *Heimskringla*, but, given its large scope, it was likely the “occupation of a lifetime” (Hollander xvi-xvii). The principal manuscripts in which we find *Heimskringla* are *Kringla*, *Jofraskinna*, and *Codex Frisianus*, all penned between c. 1260 and c. 1320²⁶. As his sources, Snorri cites the works of Ari fróði²⁷ and the accounts of other “well-informed men” (*fróða menn*) (ÍF XXVI 3). It is likely that he also had access to other histories and annals, among them the now lost *Hryggjarstykki* of Eirík Oddsson, and the *Morkinskinna* and *Fagrskinna* compilations (Hollander xvii-xix).

In *Ynglingasaga*, a semi-mythical euhemeristic origin story of the Scandinavian royal houses, Snorri describes the coming of Odin to Scandinavia in the distant past. Utilizing many elements from Norse mythology, Snorri frames Odin as a southern king possessing lands near to the Black Sea, who, foreseeing trouble in his southern realm, decides to move north. Odin and his followers travel until they reach modern-day Sweden, where he establishes himself and decrees laws and traditions concerning sacrifice: “Þá skyldi blóta í móti vetri til árs, en at miðjum vetri blóta til gróðrar, it þriðja at sumri, þat var sigrblót. Um alla Svíþjóð guldu menn Óðni skatt, penning fyrir nef hvert, en hann skyldi verja land þeira fyrir ófriði ok blóta þeim til árs”²⁸(ÍF XXVI 20-1). The three main seasonal feasts are listed here: one in early winter for a good year (*árs*), another in midwinter for a good harvest (*gróðrar*), and a third in summer for victory (*sigrblót*).

After Odin dies, Snorri continues to cement the idea of sacral kingship through the reigns of Njorð and Freyr, who both continued the sacrifices and brought the people *árs ok friðar* (22-25). Ceremonial drinking is never mentioned in these passages—only the sacrificial

24 Grønvik, O. “Kormaks vers om Sigurd jarls blot.” *Festskrift til Finn Hødnebo* 29. Desember 1989, (1989).

25 Sundqvist (187-8).

26 *Kringla* in c. 1260, *Codex Frisianus* in c. 1300, and *Jofraskinna* in c. 1320 (Hollander xxiv).

27 Ari Þorgilsson, or “Ari the Learned” (1067-1148), author of *Íslendingabók* and *Libellus Islendorum* (Hollander xvii).

28 ... a sacrifice was to be made for a good season at the beginning of winter, and one in midwinter for good crops, and a third one in summer, for victory. ... In all Sweden men paid tribute to Óthin, a penny for every head; and he was to defend their land against incursions and to make sacrifice for them so they would have good seasons (Hollander 12).

element (*blót*) of the feast is mentioned—but it is fair to assume that ritualized drinking did take place, especially with the seasonal connotation of Odin's sacrifices.

What were these ceremonies like, then? A beautiful description of such a feast is given in *Hákonar saga góða*, the saga of Hákon the Good. The saga follows Hákon, a tenth-century Norwegian king, and recounts his experiences with the pagan Norwegians. Having grown up in England, he is a Christian, which causes him trouble when his subjects expect him to fulfill the cultic responsibilities of a sacral king. Chapter fourteen of the saga describes the heathen yule feast. Animals were sacrificed and their blood was collected and spattered around with sacrificial twigs. The meat was taken away and boiled for the feast, and ceremonial toasts were made:

Skyldi full um eld bera, en sá, er gerði veizluna ok hǫfðingi var, þá skyldi hann signa fullit ok allan blótmatinn, skyldi fyrst Óðins full — skyldi þat drekka til sigrs ok ríkis konungi sínum — en síðan Njarðar full ok Freys full til árs ok friðar. Þá var mǫnnum títt at drekka þar næst bragafull. Menn drukku ok full frændasinna, þeira er heygðir hǫfðu verit, ok váru þat minni kǫlluð²⁹

(ÍF XXVI 168).

A cup (*full*) is passed around the fire, and the feast officiator was to bless (*signa*) it and offer toasts to the gods: first a toast to Odin (*Óðins full*), for the king and for victory, and then others to Frey and Njord (*Freys full* and *Njarðar full*) for *árs ok friðar*. Then they would raise a cup to the king, the *bragi full* (*bragarfull*). Finally, the men would raise memorial toasts (*minni*) to their ancestors. The terms here are used in both their concrete and abstract forms. The first two uses of full—*skyldi full* and *signa fullit*—both refer to the concrete meaning, the cup. The next three—*Óðins full*, *Njarðar full* and *Freys full*—all refer to abstract toasts, as does the term *bragafull*. The last two terms, *full* and *minni* are both abstract as well, meaning “toast” and “memorial toast.” The above toasts seem to be both supplications and vows of allegiance. By toasting the gods the people invoke them, and by the very same act they show their allegiance and support of that particular god. The same applies to the toasts to the king, when the people show their support of his authority. In this text it seems as if the toasting and sacrifice go hand in hand, which could easily reflect back on the earlier accounts of sacrifices offered by Odin, Njord, and Frey given in *Ynglingasaga*.

29 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. Óðin's toast was to be drunk first—that was for victory and power to the king—then Njorth's and Frey'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* ... (Hollander 107).

As *Hákonar saga góða* continues, the king tries to avoid such feasts as the one described above, but in chapter sixteen his subjects demand that he participate in a yule sacrifice. “Bændr segja, at þeir vilja, at konungr blóti til árs þeim ok friðar, ...”³⁰ (ÍF XXVI 170). It is very important to the people that Hákon sacrifice for *árs ok friðar*, and thus it would seem that the king is something of an intermediary between his people and the gods. Hákon is forced to attend a feast but tries to avoid the toasting and sacrifice by refusing to eat the meat and by making the sign of the cross above his cup (171). This causes friction between him and his subjects, and when they gather again for yule the following year, “Inn fyrsta dag at veizlunni veittu bændr honum atgöngu ok báðu hann blóta, en hétu honum afarkostumella. Sigurðr jarl bar þá mál í millum þeir. Kæmr þá svá, at Hákon konungr át nokkura bita af hrosslifr. Drakk hann þá öll minni krosslaust, þau er bændr skenktu honum”³¹ (ÍF XXVI 172). The farmers surround Hákon and demand that he sacrifice, threatening to force him if necessary. Under this duress, Hákon eats the sacrificial horse liver (*bita af hrosslifr*), and drinks all of the *minni* toasts given to him without making the sign of the cross (*drakk hann þá öll minni krosslaust*). The sheer importance of the king's participation is stressed here. It appears that the Norwegians rely on Hákon for their *árs ok friðar* and his refusal to participate is simply not accepted.

The story of Hákon's apostasy is not only recorded in *Heimskringla*, but also in *Ágrip* and *Fagrskinna*. Of special interest to us is *Fagrskinna*³², which says,

Hann var bæði vinsæll ok ársæll. Hann setti lög um allen Nóreg með ráði Þorleifs ens spaka ok annarra vitra manna, ok af þeim lögum nýtti enn helgi Óláfr konungr mestan hlut. Á enu sextánda ári ríkis átti hann fjölmennt þing inn í Þrándheimi á Mærini, ok á því þingi gørðu Þrændir konunginum tvá kosti, at hann skyldi blóta eptir vanða enna fyrri konunga ok fylla svá en fornu lög til árs ok friðar, elligar mundu þeir reka hann afríkinu, ef hann vildi [eigi]* í þessu vera svá fyrir þeim semum ríki eða skattöku³³ (ÍF XXIX 80).

30 The farmers said that it was their wish that the king should make sacrifice to procure for them good crops and peace, ... (Hollander 109).

31 ... the farmers thronged in upon him and asked him to sacrifice, or else they would force him to. Then Earl Sigurth mediated between them, and in the end King Hákon ate a few bits of horse liver. Then he drank all the toasts the farmers poured for him without making the sign of the cross (Hollander 111).

32 *Fagrskinna* is a catalogue of the king's of Norway—a compilation of King's Sagas—spanning the reign of Halfdan the Black in Norway's distant pre-history to that of Sverrir in c. 1177, and was likely compiled in the early 13th century (Finlay 17).

33 He was both popular and lucky for the crops. He established laws throughout Norway by the advice of Þorleifur the Wise and other skilled men, and King Ólafur the Saint incorporated the greater part of these laws. In the sixteenth year of his reign he held a great assembly inland in Mærr; at this assembly the people of Þrándheimur faced the king with alternatives: that he should worship according to the custom of past

It is interesting to note the almost pagan terminology used here to describe Hákon, he was “lucky for the crops” (*ársæll*), just as Njord and Frey had been in *Ynglingasaga*. Hákon's new laws are also mentioned (*hann setti lög*), as are the ancient laws that predated him concerning the land's *árs ok friðar* (*fornu lög til árs ok friðar*). It seems that sacrifice must be made to ratify the ancient laws (*fylla svá en fornu lög*). This is an interesting point, one that Icelandic scholar Jón Aðalsteinsson sees as especially important. He says, “... there seems to lurk an ancient formula expressing a close tie between sacrifice and lawgiving in northern lands” (89). This would suggest that everything hung on the seasonal drinking festivals—the *árs ok friðar* of the people, the laws of the land, and Hákon's legitimacy as king. Aðalsteinsson goes further with this hypothesis and says:

This work therefore seems to me to bring home to us the fact that in [the] tenth-century there survived a sacral kingship in which sacrifice and law formed a living whole, neither able to exist without the other. In the light of this, it is also understandable that Norsemen of the time would not venture to take a king who practiced a religion differing from that of his followers. The law was simply not ratified unless the highest authority in the kingdom sacrificed in association with acceptance of the laws. He sealed or confirmed it by sacrifice (90).

Such a theory about Norse sacral kingship fits and would readily explain the farmers' insistence that Hákon sacrifice. Without Hákon's participation his legitimacy as king is groundless. Thus, it seems that the seasonal drinking-festivals stand at the very center of social order. They are a venue at which old ties of allegiance to the gods and king can be renewed and future security and peace (*árs ok friðar*) can be secured.

The themes that have been seen thus far are those of the seasonal drinking-festival and the sacred king, and the strong association that they had with the general welfare of the land. *Hymiskviða* and *Lokasenna* show the gods themselves taking part in such ceremonies, and the seasonal Christian festivals described in *Ágrip* and the *Gulaping laws* seem to echo this pagan past. *Ynglingasaga* depicts the legendary origin of the feasts and ties them to the *árs ok friðar* of the land. The story of King Hákon in *Hákonar saga góða* and *Fagrskinna* flesh out the feasts and libations themselves, and stress the importance of royal sponsorship and their association with the ratification of the law. The seasonal drinking-festivals appear to be important local gatherings where—much like Qviller's symposiums—men are able to gather and interact in a peaceful and jovial environment. It is a place where they can strengthen their

kings, thus ratifying the ancient laws governing fruitfulness and peace, or else they would drive him from the kingdom if he refused to be their leader in this respect as well as in government and taking of tribute (Jón Aðalsteinsson 87).

cohesion as a group, which was a very important thing for these often far-flung communities. The existing hierarchies are also strengthened, as men swear allegiance to the king over the *bragarfull*, and enjoy the *sumbl* in the local magnate's hall. In short, the seasonal drinking-festivals seem to be a society-forming cornerstone.

In essence, the libations for *árs ok friðar* are for the continuation of life—supplications for good harvests and peace—but it must be remembered that they form an important element in the ceremonies surrounding the inverse of *árs ok friðar* as well. The *minni* and the *bragarfull* both serve important functions in the funerals of the Vikings, and it is these functions that we will examine next.

Funeral Feasts and Toasts

Funeral feasts (*erfi*) were an ancient tradition in Viking Age Scandinavia, a fact which can be attested by runic evidence. The Tune stone, from Østfold, Norway, which was likely erected in the 4th century³⁴, bears a message in Proto-Norse regarding a deceased leader, his heirs, and, possibly, their inheritance. The inscription runs as follows:

A1:	Ṁ<P P FYF TMR·PǾṀNR	ekwiwarafter.woduri
A2:	ṀMP T F Ṁ F H F ³⁵ F B F F P Ǿ R F H T Ǿ· [.]	dewitadahalaiban:worahito. [.]
B1:	[...] H:P ǾṀNR ṀM: S T F F F·	(...) h:woduride:staina:
B2:	Þ R I Ǿ Ǿ Y Ṁ M H T R I Y Ṁ F ³⁶ T Ṁ N †	þrijordohtrirdalidun
B3:	F R B I Ǿ F I Ǿ Ǿ S T M Y F R B I Ǿ F † Ǿ	arbijasijosterarbijano

Ottar Grønvik and Terje Spurkland interpret the inscription as, “*I, Wiwar in memory of Woduridar the master of the household, made these runes. I entrusted the stone to Woduridar. Three daughters arranged the funeral feast, the dearest / most devoted / most divine of heirs*” (Spurkland, 37). Most scholars agree with this reading of the first four lines, but there is disagreement over the meaning of the fifth line³⁷. The inscription mentions the

34 (Spurkland 37).

35 Ṁ+Ṁ ligature and H+Ṁ ligature

36 Ṁ+Ṁ ligature

three daughters of Woduridar and the funeral feast (**arbija**³⁸) that they prepared for him, and so it seems that funeral feasts were an important ceremony in 4th century Norway, at least in the Østfold region. It also brings up the issue of inheritance by referring to the daughters as heirs (**arbijano**). These themes of inheritance and the funeral feast naturally come up again and again in our investigation of funerary libations.

Inheritance and the *bragarfull* are important elements in the next source, Snorri's *Ynglingasaga*. He writes, “Ingjaldr konungr lét búa veizlu mikla at Uppsølum ok ætlaði at erfa Onund konung, fōður sinn,”³⁹ and continues:

Þat var siðvenja í þann tíma, þar er erfi skyldi gera eptir konunga eða jarla, þá skyldi sá, er gerði ok til arfs skyldi leiða, sitja á skörinni fyrir hásetinu allt þar til, er inn væri borit full, þat er kallat var bragafull, skyldi sá þá standa upp í móti bragafulli ok strengja heit, drekka af fullit síðan, síðan skyldi hann leiða í háseti, þat sem átti faðir hans. Var hann þá kominn til arfs alls eptir hann⁴⁰ (ÍF XXVI 66).

In this passage the inheritance ritual is described step by step: first the one who was to inherit and who arranged the funeral feast (*er gerði ok til arfs skyldi leiða*), was not supposed to sit in the ruler's high-seat (*hásetinu*)—not until the *bragarfull* was brought to him and he had made a vow (*strengja heit*) and drained it, only then would he come into his inheritance and the right to sit in the ruling seat. The first two terms—*full* and *bragarfull*—are both concrete terms, referring to the cup itself, as are the next two—*bragarfulli* and *fullit*. Ingjald's vow is soon revealed, “... at hann skyldi auka ríki sitt hálfu í hverja hofuðátt eða deyja ella ...”⁴¹ (67). Ingjald swears to double his kingdom in size, or else die trying. As the new king he is vowing to expand and, presumably, improve his domain, strong words that set his royal trajectory and likely reassured his shaken people.

37 See Elmer Antonsen's *Runes and Germanic Linguistics* (2002). He argues that **arbija** does not mean “funeral feast,” as Grønvik believes, but rather “inheritance” (129). ON *erfi*—which corresponds with **arbija**—has the double meaning of *funeral feast* and *inheritance*, and it is possible that **arbija** has the same double-meaning.

38 Corresponds with ON *erfi* (funeral feast).

39 King Ingjald had a great banquet prepared at Uppsala for the purpose of honoring King Onund, his father, with a funeral feast (Hollander 38).

40 It was custom at that time, when a funeral feast was prepared to honor a [departed] king or earl, that the one who prepared the feast and was to be inducted into the inheritance, was to sit on the step before the high-seat until the beaker called the *bragarfull* was brought in; and then he was to stand up to receive it and make a vow, then quaff the beaker, whereupon he was to be inducted in the high-seat which his father had occupied. Then he had come into the [rightful] inheritance to succeed him (Hollander 38-39).

41 ... increase his dominion to double its size in every direction, or else die (Hollander 39-40).

Ingjald's vow should be kept in mind as we move on to another royal funeral, that of Harald Bluetooth (c.958-c.986), held by his son, Svein Forkbeard of Denmark. The story is recorded in several different sources, most importantly in *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla*⁴². Both sources tell the story a little bit differently and thus each offers different insights into the investigation. The fullest account is given in *Fagrskinna*, which is where we shall begin. Two men died, Harald Bluetooth and Strút-Haraldur—the father of Sigvaldi and Þorkell, two of the Jómsvíkings⁴³—and King Svein said, “... at hann vill gøra veizluerfi Haralds konungs, fōður síns, eptir fornum sið ok bað þá bræðr til koma ok gøra erfi eptir Strút -Harald, fōður sinn ...”⁴⁴ (ÍF XXIX 124). Before describing Svein's feast, the saga gives a description of typical *erfi* feasts, which runs as follows:

En þá er erfin váru gør eptir fornum sið, þá skyldi þat skylt at gøra þau á því ári, er sá hafði andazk, er erfit var eptir gørt. En sá er gøra léti erfit, skyldi eigi fyrr setjask í þess manns sæti, er hann erfði, en menn drykki erfit. Et fyrsta kveld, er menn kómu til erfis, skyldi skenkja upp mōrg full með þeima hætti sem nú eru minni, ok eignuðu þau full enum rikustu frændum sínum eða Þór eða qðrum guðum sínum, þá er heiðni var, en siðast skyldi upp skenkja bragafull ok þá skyldi sá, er erfit gørði, strengja heit at bragafulli ok svá allir þeir er at erfinu væri, ok stíga þá í sæti þess, er erfðr var, <ok skyldi þá fullkominn vera til arfs ok virðingar eptir enn dauða, en eigi fyrr>⁴⁵

(ÍF XXIX 124).

Much can be learned from the above quotation. The *erfi* funeral feast was considered to be ancient (*eptir fornum sið*), and the heir was not allowed to sit in his predecessor's ruling seat (*eigi fyrr setjask í þess manns sæti*) until a funeral toast had been drunk (*drykki erfit*). The funeral feast seems to have started off with many lesser memorial toasts (*full* and *minni*) to

42 The story is told in *Jómsvíkinga saga* as well, but the details are much different. The important elements of the feast—the high seat, *bragarfull*, and inheritance—are not mentioned at all. Svein only mentions the practice of making vows in passing, saying “Þat veit ek menn gøra at veizlum slíkum at hafa fram heitstrengingartil ágætis sér” (Blake 28).

43 A warrior society of Vikings based in Jómshorg, and the protagonists of *Jómsvíkinga saga*.

44 ... said that he wanted to hold the memorial feast for his father King Haraldr according to ancient custom, and invited the brothers to come to it and hold the memorial feast for their father ... (Finlay 96).

45 And when memorial feasts were held according to ancient custom, it was required to hold them in the year of the death of the man in whose memory the feast was being held. And he who had the feast prepared must not sit in the high seat of the man whose memory he was honoring before men had drunk the memorial toast. The first evening, when people came to the feast, many toasts had to be offered up in the same way as memorial toasts are now, and they dedicated those toasts to their most important kinsmen, or to Þórr, or to other of their gods, in heathen times, and finally they had to drink the *bragafull*, and then he who was holding the feast had to make a vow on the *bragafull*, as did all those attending the memorial feast, and then he had to mount into the seat of the man who was being honoured, and he then entered fully into possession of the inheritance and honour of the dead man, but not before (Finlay 97).

departed kinsmen (*rikustu frændum*) and the pagan gods (*Þór eða ǫðrum guðum*). In this instance, *full* means toast, and not a cup, and is compared to the memorial toasts (*minni*) of Snorri's day. Following the lesser toasts, the heir would make a vow on the *bragafull* (*strengja heit at bragafulli*), before seating himself in the high seat (*stíga þá í sæti*) and claiming his full inheritance (*fullkominn vera til arfs*). The term *bragafull* is used in both its concrete and abstract forms. The toast is drunk (*upp skenkja bragafull*), and a vow is made on the cup (*strengja heit at bragafulli*). It is interesting to note that the other feast goers had to swear on the *bragafull* as well (*ok svá allir þeir er at erfinu væri*). Elements from *Ynglingasaga* are repeated and reaffirmed. The heir cannot sit his father's seat or claim his full inheritance until the *strengja heit* has been made and the *bragarfull* has been drunk.

In the course of the memorial feast King Svein swears on his *bragafull* to conquer England or die trying, and then claims his inheritance and his father's chair. Next Jarl Sigvaldi swears to conquer Norway, and his men follow suit (ÍF XXIX 125-26). These boasts also conform to the example laid out in *Ynglingasaga*. Svein, the new king of Denmark, swears to conquer England and thus enrich his own kingdom. The vows of Jarl Sigvaldi and the Jómsvíkings are slightly different, however, and are more akin to the boasting of warriors than to the vows of kings. Ingjald and Svein promise to enlarge their kingdoms, where the Jómsvíkings make vows to enlarge their honor⁴⁶. This latter part of the account—the vows made on the cups—does not vary much between the sources.

The next source to record the event is *Heimskringla's Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*. The saga says, “Sveinn konungr gerði mannboð ríkt ok stefndi til sín ǫllum hǫfðingjum þeim, er vǫru í ríki hans. Hann skyldi erfa Harald, fǫður sinn”⁴⁷ (ÍF XXVI 273). In addition to Harald Bluetooth and Strút-Harald, now Véseti of Borgundarholm—father of Bui, another Jómsvíking—has also died. The saga continues that, “Fyrsta dag at veizlunni, áðr Sveinn konungr stigi í hásæti fǫður síns, þá drakk hann minni hans ok strengði heit, áðr þrír vetr væri liðnir, at hann skyldi kominn með her sinn til Englands ok drepa Aðalráð konung eða reka hann ór landi. Þat minni skyldu allir drekka, þeir erat erfinu vǫru”⁴⁸ (ÍF XXVI 274). Before he

46 The boasting of warriors (ON *Heitstrenging* and OE *Beotword*) will be discussed later in this essay.

47 King Svein arranged a great feast, requesting the presence of all the chieftains in his realm. He intended to honor his father Harald with a funeral feast, and enter into his inheritance (Hollander 175).

48 On the first day of the banquet, before King Svein ascended the high-seat of his father, he drank to his memory and made the vow that before three years had passed he would have invaded England with his army and killed King Æthelred or driven him from the country. All who were at the funeral feast were to drink that memorial toast (Hollander 175).

can get his inheritance (*erfa*) or sit in his father's chair (*stigi í hásceti fǫður síns*), Svein must make a toast and vow (*þá drakk hann minni hans ok strengði heit*). The details here are very similar to those found in *Fagrskinna*, although here the term *bragarfull* is not used, but rather Svein's toast is referred to as a *minni*. Once again, we see that all of the feasters must join the king in his toast (*Þat minni skyldu allir drekka*).

After Svein's *minni* had been drunk other toasts were offered. “En er þat minni var af drukkit, þá skyldi drekka Krists minni allir menn, ok var Jómsvíkingum borit æ fullast ok sterkastr drykkr. It þriðja var Mikjáls minni, ok drukku þat allir”⁴⁹ (ÍF XXVI 274). Christian toasts are offered to honor Christ (*Krists minni*) and the Archangel Michael (*Mikjáls minni*). These seem to be the same toasts that *Fagrskinna* describes as being offered to ancestors and pagan gods, only now they are offered to Christian figures. This change might be due to the saga's running theme of Óláfr Tryggvason's efforts to Christianize Norway. The continuity of the toasts must be noted, though, and—just like the Christian drinking-festivals mentioned in *Ágrip* and the *Gulaping laws*—the toasts continue, even though the deities have changed. After the religious toasts, Jarl Sigvaldi and the Jómsvíkings swear to invade Norway⁵⁰.

The above account is not as detailed as the one given in *Fagrskinna*, but many similarities do stand out. The importance of the heir's toast (be it *bragarfull* or *minni*) before ascending to the high-seat and claiming one's inheritance is reinforced, and it seems that all of those present needed to join the heir's toast. The practice of lesser toasts given to deities remains, although the toasts made to kinsmen are not mentioned. The order of the toasts has changed as well. In *Fagrskinna*, the lesser toasts were offered first, and followed by the inheritance *bragarfull*. In *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, the inheritance *bragarfull* comes first, and then the lesser toasts.

The accounts of *Ynglinga saga*, *Fagrskinna*, and *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* paint an interesting picture of Viking Age funerary drinking customs. They all agree on the following points: funerary feasts were required in order for an heir to come into his or her full and legitimate inheritance; the heir was not allowed to sit in the ruling seat until the *bragarfull* had been drunk and a vow had been made, and that the custom was very old. The *bragarfull* boast

49 When the memorial horn had been emptied, then all were to drink a memorial toast to Christ, and the Jómsvíkings were always served with the fullest horns and the strongest drink. The third memorial toast was brought to [Archangel] Michael, and all drank that (Hollander 175-6).

50 En eptir þat drakk Sigvaldi jarl minni fǫður síns ok strengði heit síðan, at áðr þrír vetr væri liðnir, skyldi hann vera kominn í Nóreg ok drepa Hákon jarl eða reka hann ór landi, ... (ÍF XXVI 274).

makes sense in the context of the inheritance of power. Every royal boast—Ingjald's vow to double his domain in all directions, Svein's oath to conquer England—is, at its core, a new leader's vow to further and maintain his new kingdom. Vows like these would have been important and reassuring to the new monarch's followers. In this way, funeral feasts were a form of legitimization, where honor was given to the late lord and prayers were made to the gods—be they pagan or Christian—for the new ruler, who vowed to strengthen and maintain the kingdom. These vows also seem to have strengthened group solidarity, as all of the feasters joined the new king in his *bragarfull* vow⁵¹.

The importance of alcohol at funeral feasts can be seen in other sources outside of the sagas as well. The famous 10th century description of a Rūs⁵² funeral by the Arab emissary Ibn Fadlān shows the significance that alcohol had in Viking funerals in Eastern Europe. Describing the funeral preparations, Ibn Fadlān says, “... they gather together his [the dead man's] fortune and divide it into three parts, one for his family, one to have clothes cut out for him and another to have *nabīdh*⁵³ prepared that they will drink on the day that his slave girl kills herself and is burned with her master”⁵⁴ (Ibn Fadlān 49). One third of the man's wealth—and only the very rich could afford such a funeral—went to brewing alcohol, which shows the importance that they placed on the funeral feast, and especially on the alcoholic element of the feast. Ibn Fadlān's account does not mention a successor to the throne or his vows however, and instead largely follows the events surrounding the young slave girl who volunteers to be killed and burned with her dead master. Although its use seems to be less ceremonial, alcohol does still play a major part in the life of the girl. After she has agreed to die with her master, she does not take part in any work but rather she, “... spends each day drinking and singing, happily and joyfully” (50). Later, when they lift her onto the funeral ship with the dead man, they ply her with more *nabīdh* (53). Here alcohol serves another

51 It must be remembered, of course, that *minni* does mean “memory,” and that one purpose of these toasts were to give honor to the deceased. It is in this sense that we see *minni* used in *Adóniass saga*, an Icelandic Chivalric saga (*riddarasögur*) from the fifteenth-century (Loth ix). In the saga, a *minni* toast is given after a large battle: Nu sem vt voru druckin minne og vm farenn pinne þa krafði A(donias) sierhliods og sem þat fieckzt þa tok A(donias) suo til ordz og m(ælti) ... (Loth 224).

52 Scandinavians who plied the rivers of Eastern Europe.

53 *Nabīdh*, is “a comprehensive designation for intoxicating drinks, several kinds of which were produced in early Arabia, ...” often from barley, honey, spelt, and dates (*Encyclopedia of Islam* 840). Ibn Fadlān is probably not talking about actual Arabian *nabīdh*, however, and instead using the word as a generic term for “alcoholic beverage.”

54 Ibn Fadlān offers an interesting comment on Rūs drinking habits in the following sentence, saying, “For the drink *nabīdh* unrestrainedly, night and day, so that sometimes one of them dies with his wine cup in his hand” (Ibn Fadlān 49).

function in ceremony, although one markedly different from what we've seen before. It seems that the alcohol is being used to subdue the girl before her execution. She has consigned herself to a gruesome fate, and alcohol is used to distract her from that fact before the funeral, and it is used at the funeral itself to inhibit her rational thinking.

In the above sources we have seen evidence of a funeral feast tradition as far back as 4th century Norway in the Tune stone, and as far abroad as the Volga in modern day Russia in the writings of Ibn Fadlān. The primary saga material found in *Ynglingasaga*, *Fagrskinna*, and *Heimskringla* all point to a well defined ceremony of memorial libations, inheritance, and the transfer of power. In each case we see an opportunity for enhancing group solidarity. Important themes have been religion, boasting, royal power, group solidarity, and the drinking ceremonies through which these themes have found expression. Keeping these themes in mind, we will turn our attention to the Anglo-Saxons who—themselves immigrants from northern Europe and Denmark—share a similar North Germanic culture with the Scandinavians of the Viking Age. Both peoples have important drinking rituals that often overlap, and so a study of ceremonial drinking in the Viking Age would be incomplete without an investigation of the Anglo-Saxons and their *lady with a mead-cup*.

Anglo-Saxon Toasting and Boasting

The axis of the Anglo-Saxon world was the hall of the king or local magnate, just as it was for the Scandinavians. It provided a social environment for people to come together. Stephen Pollington explains the Anglo-Saxon poetic definition of the great hall, or the mead hall, as a “... shorthand notation for the Germanic customs and observances surrounding the consumption and distribution of food and drink in a ceremonial setting, the giving and receiving of honorifics and rewards, and the establishment of a communal identity expressed through formal relationships to a pair of individuals whom we may call the 'lord and lady'” (19). It is in this environment that we find the *mead-cup* ritual, a ceremony which focuses on the lady of the house as she carries a cup of mead⁵⁵ to the men in the hall. The ritual would run as follows: First, she would serve her husband, and then she would move on to serve his thanes, who would sometimes rise after accepting the cup to boast of the great deeds they

⁵⁵ The poetic image is of mead, but other alcoholic drinks such as ale, beer, and wine would have been used as well.

would do to repay the lord for his patronage—for his *mead*. The ceremony is many layered and carries with it a great many implications, and will now be examined in detail.

It will be helpful to begin with two idealized portrayals of the mead dispensing ceremony found in the poems *Maxims I*⁵⁶ and *Beowulf*. All of the aspects of the *mead-cup* ritual are found in *Maxims I*, as can be seen:

Cyning scael mid ceape cwene gebicgan
bunum ond beagum. Bu sceolon ærest
geofum god wesan. Guð scael 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 ætsomme⁵⁷
(Shippey 68).

The lady must be wise and cheerful (*leohtmod wesan*) and liked by her people (*leof mid hyre leodum*), and she must keep her lord's secrets (*rune healdan*). One notes the important position that the lady holds as a keeper of secrets and a joint master of the household (*boldagendum bæm ætsomme*). When it comes time to serve mead, she is to carry the cup to her husband first (*eodor æþelinga ærest gegretan*). These are all important elements of the *lady with a mead cup* motif. She was an adviser and a part of her husband's administration.

56 It is hard to precisely date *Maxims I* which could have been composed anywhere between the eighth and the early tenth centuries (Enright 7). It is found in the Exeter Book, however, which was likely compiled in the tenth century (Kershaw xii).

57 The nobleman must have fighting-spirit, his courage must grow, and his wife be a success, liked by her people; she must be cheerful, keep secrets, be generous with horses and precious things; at mead-drinking she must at all times and places approach the protector of princes first, in front of the companions, quickly pass the first cup to her lord's hand, and know what advice to give him as joint master and mistress of the house together (Shippey 69).

The ideal of the “good life” in the hall possibly finds its best expression in the epic *Beowulf*⁵⁸, a somewhat ironic fact given that Heorot—the hall in question—is suffering from the depredations of a monster named Grendel. Hearing of the monster's attacks, the hero Beowulf travels to modern-day Denmark to offer his services to Hrothgar, the Danish king. Hrothgar accepts and a feast is held. During the feast, Wealhtheow—the queen, the *lady with a mead cup*—enters and goes her ceremonial rounds:

Eode Wealhþeow forð
 cwen Hroðgares cynna gemyndig;
 grette gold-hroden guman on healle,
 ond þa freolic wif ful gesealde
 ærest East-Dena eþel-wearde;
 bæd hine bliðne æt þære beor-þege,
 leodum leofne; he on lust geþeah
 symbol ond sele-ful sige-rof kyning.
 Ymb-eode þa ides Helminga
 duguþe ond geogoþe dæl æghwylcne
 sinc-fato sealde oppæt sæl alamp
 þæt hio Beowulfe, beag-hroden cwen
 mode geþungen medo-ful ætbær;
 grette Geata leod, Gode þancode
 wis-fæst wordum, þæs ðe se willa gelamp,
 þæt heo on ænigne eorl gelyfde
 fyrena frofre⁵⁹ (Chickering lines 612-28).

58 *Beowulf* is found in the Cotton Vitellius A.xv. manuscript which was written around the year 1000 (Donaldson vii). The actual composition date of the poem is much more difficult to place, however, and scholars have argued for dates spanning from 675 to 1025, a period of over 350 years (Howe 183). For more information on the dating of *Beowulf*, see Nicholas Howe's “The Uses of Uncertainty: On the dating of *Beowulf*” (1997).

59 ... Wealhtheow came forward, / Hrothgar's queen, mindful of courtesies; / attired in her gold, she welcomed the men. / The noble lady gave the first cup, / filled to the brim, to the king of the Danes, / bade him rejoice in this mead-serving, / beloved by his people; he took it happily, / victory-famed king, the hall-cup and feast. / The lady of the Helmings walked through the hall, / offered the jeweled cup to veterans and youths, / until the time came that the courteous queen, / splendid in rings, excellent in virtues, / came to Beowulf, brought him the mead. / She greeted him well, gave thanks to God, / wise in

We see Wealhtheow enter, all bedecked in gold (*gold-hroden*) and courteous (*cynna gemyndig*). She gives the first mead-cup to Hrothgar (*ful gesealde ærest East-Dena eþelwearde*). After serving her king, she takes the cup to the other men in the hall (*Ymb-eode þa ides Helminga duguþe ond geogouþe dæl æghwylcne sinc-fato sealde*). Finally she approaches Beowulf and serves him, greeting him warmly (*grette Geata leod*). Wealhtheow's actions match up very well with the instructions given in *Maxims I*. She is both wise and courteous and offers the mead to Hrothgar first before bringing it to his followers. As a representative of the king—a point which we will examine later—her appearance, all decked in gold (*beag-hroden cwen*), is appropriate, underlying the wealth and power of Hrothgar. Beowulf's response to Wealhtheow's mead and kind words are also important in the *lady with a mead cup* ritual, for the mead must be paid for:

He þæt ful geþeah,
wæl-reow wiga, æt Wealhþeon,
ond þa gyddode guþe gefysed;
Beowulf mapelode, bearn Ecgþeowes:
“Ic þæt hogode, þa ic on holm gestah;
sæ-bat gesæt mid minra secga gedriht,
þæt ic anunga eowra leoda
willan geworhte, oþðe on wæl crunge,
feond-grapum fæst. Ic gefremman seal
eorlic ellen, oþðe ende-dæg
on þisse meodu-healle minne gebidan”⁶⁰
(628-38).

Upon accepting Wealhtheow's mead, Beowulf swears to rid the Danish realm of Grendel (*þæt ic anunga eowra leoda willan geworhte*), or else die at the monster's hand (*oþðe on wæl crunge, feond-grapum fæst*). He vows to perform a heroic deed (*eorlic ellen*), or else die in the

her words, that her wish came to pass, / that she might expect help against crimes / from any man. ... (Chickering lines 612-28).

60 ... He accepted the cup / battle-fierce warrior, from Wealhtheow's hand, / then made a speech, eager for combat— / Beowulf spoke, Ecgtheow's son: / “I made up my mind, when I set out to sea, / boarded our ship with my band of men, / that I would entirely fulfill the desire / of the Danish nation or else fall slaughtered, / in the grip of the foe. Tonight I will do / a heroic deed or else I will serve / my last day of life here in this mead-hall” (Chickering 628-38).

attempt. Beowulf's vow is the expected response to Hrothgar's hospitality. The mead is not free, it is in fact a sort of payment for Beowulf's services, and by boasting he acknowledges the bargain and tells how he plans to repay the Danish king. His actions mirror those of the warriors that came before him, as Hrothgar relates, saying, "Ful oft gebeoteton beore druncne / ofer ealo-wæge oret-mecgas, / þæt hie in beor-sele bidan woldon / Grendles guþe mid gryrum ecga"⁶¹ (480-3). Other men have vowed to kill Grendel, but, unfortunately, none of them were destined to have Beowulf's success.

After Beowulf successfully defeats Grendel, another feast is held where Wealhtheow serves mead again, following the same formula as before (1168-72). Here once again we note that she serves Hrothgar first, and encourages good will in the hall. The image of Wealhtheow as the ideal queen is further supported later in the text when Beowulf relates the festivities in Hrothgar's hall to his lord and lady back in his homeland. He says:

Hwilum mæru cwen,
 friðu-sibb folca, flet eall geond-hwearf,
 bædde byre geonge; oft hio beah-wriðan
 secge [sealde], ær hie to setle geong.
 Hwilum for [d]uguðe dohtor Hroðgares
 eorlum on ende ealu-wæge bær ...⁶²
 (2016-21).

Wealhtheow, a peace-weaver of peoples (*friðu-sibb folca*), mixes with the men of the hall (*flet eall geond-hwearf*), offering encouragement (*bædde byre geonge*) and gifts (*oft hio beah-wriðan secge [sealde]*). The princess also performs a similar task (*dohtor Hroðgares ... ealu-wæge bær*). These actions are also acted out by Hygd⁶³, the young queen of the Geats, who is praised for her wisdom, courtesy, and generosity (1925-31). In all of these accounts the important aspects to note are the queens' hierarchical distribution methods (i.e. serve the king first), their positions as wise advisers, and their good relations with the men of the hall.

61 "Often indeed my warrior thanes / boasted over ale-horns, bold in their mead, / that they would meet Grendel's attack / in the banquet hall with a rush of swords" (Chickering 480-3).

62 ... His famous queen, / peace-weaver of nations. Walked through the hall, / encouraged the striplings; time and again / before she was seated she gave gold bracelets. / At times his daughter took vessels of mead / to the veteran nobility throughout the whole hall; ... (2016-21).

63 Meodu-scencum hwearf / geond þæt [heal]-reced Hæreðes dohtor, / lufode ða leode lið-wæge bær / hae[leð]um to handa (1980-3).

Important also are the reactions of the men after receiving their mead, that is, their vows of loyalty and service.

The significance of the mead-cup ritual is analyzed by Michael Enright, professor of Medieval History, who sees the lady of the house as very important to social stability. He says:

... the royal consort normally played a significant if subordinate role in the establishment of order and hierarchy among the members of the warband and that, just as women in the wider world were used to bind families in alliances, so did the queen act to help achieve cohesion and unity of purpose between lord and follower in the royal hall (2).

The men of the hall—Hrothgar's warband, his elite troop—was necessary for maintaining power in ages before centralized royal power, but it was, naturally, a difficult organization to handle. The king banded together a host of professional warriors who needed to be housed and fed. This already promises a hoard of potential problems and—in a worst case scenario—brings to mind the warband of ungovernable bullies in *Hrólfs saga kraka*⁶⁴. In addition to the room and board, he also has to reward his men with valuable gifts, which, in turn, motivate them to strive for better recognition and compensation. Such an arraignment is bound to lead to violence unless it is carefully managed. As Enright explains, “the real atmosphere of the mead-hall, as opposed to its sanitized idealization [i.e. the poetic mead-hall], often rippled with currents of bitterness and jealousy which gave rise to polemic, vindictiveness and bloodshed” (20). A primary device used to manage this potential maelstrom was the *mead-cup* ritual, along with the interplay of the king and his agents⁶⁵, and the practice of gift giving⁶⁶. The two latter institutions do not directly involve alcohol and will not be examined in detail⁶⁷.

64 Byock, *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki* (1998), Chapter 23.

65 In *Beowulf* we see a three part system of leadership within the warband. The lord holds the highest position and dictates the policy of his hall, but he does not always implement his decision personally. That duty often falls to his court agents—that is his wife (the lady), the poet (*scop*) and his spokesmen (*byle*) (Enright 14-18). The lady and the *byle* operate as a sort of “good cop, bad cop” team, one asking the hard questions and stirring up strife, and the other soothing said strife, while all the while the lord is able to remain aloof. The *byle* Unferth challenges *Beowulf* (lines 499-528), and then *Wealhtheow* praises *Beowulf* and consoles his pride (622-28).

66 The practice of gift-giving is a cornerstone of the warband, whereby the lord and lady distribute gifts and other valuables to their followers in recognition of the warriors' accomplishments. The lord typically distributes his gifts from his high-seat. Such can be seen in *Beowulf* where the hero is rewarded repeatedly, first after he defeats Grendel (Chickering line 1020-49), then again after he defeats Grendel's mother (1866-69), and once more when he returns to his homeland (2190-96).

67 Michael Enright goes into both topics in great detail in his book, *Lady with a Mead Cup*, and interested

The *mead-cup* ritual strengthened warband integrity by binding its members together and reinforcing their internal hierarchy. The *mead-cup* ritual and the sharing of alcohol was a powerful way to create and reinforce community, as Stephen Pollington explains:

The consumption of alcohol was a critical aspect of the Anglo-Saxon version of the 'good life', not because alcohol was considered an end in itself, but rather because participation in public ceremonies in which special foods and drinks were consumed in a highly structured and ritualized manner was a conspicuous statement of 'involvement', of belonging to the host community" (21).

One need only peruse Old English poems such as *the Wanderer* or *the Seafarer*⁶⁸, or look into the Icelandic outlaw sagas⁶⁹ to understand how important belonging to a community truly was. A man without a lord and a tribe was on his own against the rest of the world. Fostering community was not the only objective of the *mead-cup* ritual, however, as Enright explains, it was not, "... just a communal bonding rite which made the *comitatus* a band of brothers, although it did that too; its primary purpose was to establish the lordship of the individual first served and named and the subordinate status of those served afterwards" (10). The act of serving the king first reaffirmed his dominance, and—given that seats near the king were the most prestigious—it seems natural and likely that the assigned seats of the thanes (warriors) dictated their social status (13-14). With the contentious environment of competition, jealousy, and one-up-manship within the warband, the queen was an imperative figure. When the poets stress the importance of courtesy and wisdom in their noble women, they are describing vital traits, for it was largely she who kept the peace in the ranks.

The role of the noblewoman as a *freoðuwebbe*—a "peace-weaver," that is, a woman married off to a rival nation or family in an effort to make peace and or strengthen relations between both groups—is a well known and studied aspect of Medieval life⁷⁰. The *freoðuwebbe* did not only function between external groups, however, but also within the hall

readers are encouraged to look for more information there (1-37). Other sources on gift-giving are Aaron J. Gurevich's, "Wealth and Gift-Bestowal Among the Ancient Scandinavians" (1968), Charles Donahue's, "Potlatch and Charity: Notes on the Heroic in *Beowulf*" (1975), and Annette Weiner's *Inalienable possessions: the paradox of keeping-while-giving* (1992). For more information of the interplay of the lord and his agents, see Carol Clover's, "The Germanic Context of the Unferth Episode" (1980), and Norman Eliason's, "The Pyle and the Scop in *Beowulf*" (1963).

68 Both found in the Exeter Book, a manuscript likely compiled in the tenth century (Kershaw xii).

69 For instance, *Gísla saga Súrssonar* and *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*.

70 Important works on the subject are Larry H. Sklute's, "*Freoðuwebbe* in Old English Poetry" (1970), and Joel T. Rosenthal's "Marriage and the Blood Feud in 'Heroic' Europe" (1966).

itself, acting as a mediator between the lord and his followers. Enright explains:

Wealththeow is a binder, a “weaver,” and may also perhaps be called an oath-carrier. In Hrothgar's hall she is the instrument which sanctifies his status by naming him lord, by serving him before all others and by causing each of the retainers to drink after him. By serving the followers in strict order of precedence she also sanctifies the status of each warrior in relation to his companions (22).

Her passage reaffirms those in the king's good graces and shows continued acceptance of those who are not. We are reminded of Wealththeow's kind words for Beowulf (lines 625-28), and for the young warriors of Hrothgar's court (621). Her acceptance of, and courteous words for, the men lower on the social ladder were vital to the warband system, as Enright explains, “her cheering words and gifts help the unsuccessful to accept their lot and bide their time. From the social viewpoint that is her primary function, to make a harsh life full of conflict and rivalry more bearable” (22). Such an arrangement makes complete sense; in the alpha-male dominated warband, sensitive issues like honor and status would have been more aptly handled by the powerful—yet separate—figure of the lady. As an extension of her husband, bolstered by her own private rapport with the men, she had the power and position to deliver such sensitive verdicts, and as a secure figure outside of the retainers' internal power struggles—and thus not a rival—her messages would be more readily accepted. Enright agrees, saying, “although her husband fixes the status gradations she can make his decisions more palatable through subtle non-threatening mediation appropriate to a woman. It is effective because of her sex, because of the religious significance of the ritual and because she shares some of the characteristics of both lord and follower without full membership in either category” (35). All things considered, the queen—a liminal figure—is the ideal emissary between the lord and his men, and the *mead-cup* ceremony a custom-crafted vehicle for her efforts.

The lady with a mead cup ritual can be seen, to a certain extent, in the Old Norse material as well. Three such examples can be found in the eddic poems *Hýmiskviða*, *Lokasenna*, and *Skírnismál*⁷¹, two of which have already been discussed in our investigation of seasonal drinking-festivals. In *Hýmiskviða*, the gods Týr and Thor travel to Jotunheim to fetch a large cauldron in order to brew beer for their seasonal *sumbl*. When the gods arrive at the home of Hýmír—the owner of the cauldron—they are greeted by the Jotunn's wife as follows, “Enn ǫnnor gecc, algullin, fram, / brúnhvít, bera biórveig syni: // 'Áttniðr iǫtna,

⁷¹ *Lokasenna*, *Skírnismál*, and *Hýmiskviða*, are all part of the *Poetic Edda*, and found in the Codex Regius manuscript, which was likely written in Iceland in the 1270s, although its original date of composition is impossible to know (Larrington xi).

ec viliac ycr, / hugfulla tvá, und hvera setia. / Er minn frí mǫrgo sinni / glöggr við gesti, gorr illz hugar⁷² (Neckel 89). The lady is dressed appropriately, all decked in gold (*algullin*), and brings the gods beer (*bera biórveig*). She also shows courtesy to her guests when she offers to hide them from her quarrelsome husband (*ec viliac ycr, hugfulla tvá, und hvera setia*). It is striking that she acts independently from her husband, though, and even contradicts his apparent dislike for strangers. The grumpy, foolish, and antagonistic attitude of her husband goes a long way toward explaining her behavior, however. In light of his foolishness, her actions come across as wise.

After the gods retrieve Hýmír's cauldron, they bring it to the god Ægir and the poem *Lokasenna* begins. The gods sit down to their seasonal drinking-feast, but exclude Loki. Indignant at being excluded, Loki gate-crashes the party and starts a *senna*—an argument—with the other gods. After he has insulted most of them, Sif comes forward to try to calm him—and win a good word for herself—with the welcoming mead-cup ritual:

Þá gekk Sif fram oc byrlaði Loca í hrímkálki mið oc mælti:

'Heill ver þú nú, Loki, oc tac við hrímkálki,

fullom forns miaðar,

heldr þú hana eina látir með ása sonum

vammalause vera⁷³

(Neckel 107).

Once again, the mead-cup ritual is not perfectly reenacted, but elements of it are recognizable. Sif's greeting (*Heill ver þú nú, Loki*) shows her acceptance of the ostracized trickster. Thus far in the poem the gods have grudgingly given Loki a seat and a drink, but none of them have welcomed him to the feast or made any move to include him in the community. Sif formally offers Loki mead from a treasured cup (*tac við hrímkálki, fullom forns miaðar*) and attempts to make him welcome at the feast. Her kind greeting is also reminiscent of the encouraging words offered by the *lady with a mead cup* to the agitated men of the warband. In Sif's actions we can see an effort to bring peace to the gathering. Her efforts, unfortunately, are rejected by

72 "... and another woman, all decked in gold, walked forward / with shining brows, bearing beer to her boy. // 'Kinsman of giants, I'd like to hide you / two valiant men under the cauldron. / My dear husband, on many occasions, / is stingy to guests, bad-tempered towards them'" (Larrington 79).

73 Then Sif went forward and poured out mead for Loki into a crystal cup and said: // 'Welcome, now, Loki, and take the crystal cup / full of ancient mead, / you should admit, among the children of the Æsir, / that I alone am blameless' (Larrington 93).

Loki, who then goes on to insult her as well.

Another strained welcoming cup is offered in the poem *Skírnismál*. The poem follows the efforts of Skirnir as he entreats the Jotunn maiden Gerd to become the consort of the god Freyr. Gerd cannot be persuaded by gifts or threats and finally Skirnir resorts to witchcraft, threatening to curse her if she does not comply. The last threat is too much, and Gerd agrees, saying:

'Heill verðu nú heldr, sveinn, oc tac við hrímkálki,
fullom forns miaðar!
Þó hafða ec þat ætlað, at myndac aldregi
unna vaningia vel'⁷⁴
(Neckel 76).

Here we have the welcoming mead-cup ritual under very different circumstances. Gerd has been—understandably—cold to Skirnir up until now, but after resigning herself to Freyr's bed she finally welcomes Skirnir to her home (*Heill verðu nú heldr, sveinn*) and offers him a precious cup of ancient mead (*tac við hrímkálki, fullom forns miaðar*). The cup of mead is more than a simply welcoming, though, and likely signifies the sealing of their bargain. They “drink on” their compromise, and the liquor adds weight to Gerd's vow to be Freyr's consort (Einarsson 102-3). It is interesting to note the close association between women and ale-vows seen above. Thus far the women have been offering mead and accepting vows—apart from Gerd, who makes a vow of her own—but it seems that they were also often the objects of vows.

In many instances men swear on their cups to acquire specific women. Good examples of this can be seen in *Jómsvíkinga saga*, *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs*, and in the eddic poem *Helgaqviða Hiqvarðzsonar*⁷⁵. The boast in *Jómsvíkinga saga*⁷⁶ comes from the funeral feast of Harald Bluetooth, the same *erfi* feast previously discussed. After Sigvaldi vows on his *minni* to drive earl Hákon from Norway, his Jómsvíkings swear to follow him. One warrior among them, Vagn, makes an additional boast, saying, “Þat skal ok fylgja þessi heitstrenging

74 'Be welcome now, lad, and receive the crystal cup, / full of ancient mead; / though I had never thought that I should ever love / one of the Vanir well' (Larrington 67).

75 Further examples can also be found in *Landámabók* and *Svarfdæla saga* (Enright 81).

76 *Jómsvíkinga saga* was likely composed in c. 1200 in Iceland, though its surviving manuscripts come from the late 13th-16th centuries (Blake xvi-xviii).

ef ek kóm í Nóreg at ek skal drepa Þorkelleiru en ganga í rekkju Ingibjargar, dóttur hans, án frænda ráði”⁷⁷ (Blake 29). Here we see Vagn vowing (*heitstrenging*) over a *minni* to take a woman against the will of her father and relatives⁷⁸ (*ganga í rekkju Ingibjargar ... án frænda ráði*). This vow is seen in a very similar light to other *beot* and *heitstrenging* boasts—the man vows to overcome great obstacles to reach a goal and achieve honor—and can be compared to Beowulf’s vow to kill Grendel, even though the subject matter is quite different.

A very similar vow is made by the berserker Angantýr in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs*⁷⁹. The saga says, “einn jólaaptan í Bólm þá strengði Angantýr heit at bragarfulli, sem siðvenja var til, at hann skyldi eiga dóttur Yngva konungs at Uppsölum Ingibjörgu, þá mey er fegrst var ok vitrust á danska tungu, eða falla at qðrum kosti, ...”⁸⁰ (Helgason 5). At what appears to be a *jól* (*jólaaptan*) seasonal feast, Angantýr, swears over his *bragarfull* to have the princess Ingibjörg (*at hann skyldi eiga ... Ingibjörgu*), or die in the attempt. Ingibjörg is described as the wisest maiden (*mey er ... vitrust*), which is an important trait of the ideal lady as seen in *Maxims I*. Although perhaps not so violent as Vagn’s boast, Angantýr’s vow to claim Ingibjörg is driven by the same motives of glory and lust. That he makes his vow over a *bragarfull* at the *jól* feast is important to note as well, for it further supports the association of the two.

The association is further strengthened by the poem *Helgaqviða Hiqvarðzsonar*⁸¹. In the poem, the warrior Heðinn is returning home at Yuletide when he is cursed by a troll-woman, as follows:

Heðinn var heima með fõður sínum, Hiorvarði konungi, í Nóregi. Heðinn fór einn saman heim ór scógi jólaaptan oc fann trollkonoæ sú reið vargi oc hafði orma at taumom, oc bauð fylgð sína Heðni. 'Nei,' sagði hann.

Hon sagði: 'Þess scaltu gialda at bragarfulli.'

77 The second part of my vow is that if I get to Norway I shall kill Þorkell leira and go to bed with Ingibjörg, his daughter, without the consent of her relatives (Blake 29).

78 And presumably against her will as well, though that is beside the point as far as Vagn is concerned.

79 *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs* is a legendary saga (fornaldarsaga) from the thirteenth century (Einarsson 113).

80 One Yule even in Bólm Angantýr swore at the Bragi cup, as then was customary, that he should get the daughter of Yngvi ... king at Uppsälir, Ingibjörg by name, the fairest and wisest maiden within the Danish-speaking world, or else fall [in battle] (Einarsson 113).

81 *Helgaqviða Hiqvarðzsonar*, like the poems *Lokasenna* and *Hymisqviða*, is part of the *Poetic Edda*, and found in the Codex Regius manuscript, which was likely written in Iceland in the 1270s, although its original date of composition is impossible to know (Larrington xi).

The troll-woman's curse comes to fruition later that night at the feast:

Um qveldit óro heitstrengingar. Var fram leiddr sonargoltr, lögðo menn þar á hendr sínar, oc strengðo menn þá heit at bragarfulli. Heðinn strengði heit til Svávo, Eylima dóttur, unnusto Helga, bróður síns, ...⁸² (Neckel 147).

Heðinn rejects the advances of a troll-woman and is cursed by her (*Þess scaltu gialda at bragarfulli*). The curse becomes evident at the *jól* feast that evening when the *bragarfull* is passed around and men make their vows (*heitstrengingar*), and Heðinn—against his will—swears to have Sváva (*Heðinn strengði heit til Svávo*), his brother's beloved. Here all of the elements unite: the seasonal drinking-festival of *jól*, the *heitstrenging* vows sworn over the *bragarfull* cup, and the claiming of a woman in said vows.

A new twist is given to the maiden-claiming theme in *Ragnarssona þáttr*⁸³. In the story a jarl gives his young daughter a pet snake. The two grow up together, and while the girl becomes lovely, the snake becomes massive and fierce, encircling the house, and scaring away all would-be admirers. The serpent becomes such a threat that the jarl promises his daughter's hand in marriage to any man brave and skilled enough to kill it. The jarl makes his vow over a *bragarfull* (*I(arl) strengði þa þers heit at bragar fvlli*), and is rewarded by the appearance of Ragnar Loðbrók, the hero to slay the worm⁸⁴. The story is very fairytale like, and part of the larger semi-mythic corpus surrounding Ragnar, but the *bragarfull* vow is given in the correct context. Here we see a vow being underscored by the solemnity of the *bragarfull* ceremony.

In the above section we have seen the strong association between women and drink that appears to exist in the Old Norse and Anglo-Saxon traditions. The *lady with a mead cup* of *Beowulf* and *Maxims I* is wise and courteous, and helps to establish, renew, and maintain her husband's authority through her *mead-cup* ritual. Her efforts soothe the members of the warband, and strengthen the cohesion of the group. Her efforts also elicit vows of service from the gathered warriors. Such actions are seen again in *Hýmisqviða* and *Lokasenna*, where

82 Hedin was at home with his father, King Hiorvard, in Norway. Hedin was going home alone from the woods one Yule evening and he met a troll-woman; she was riding a wolf and had serpents as reins. She offered Hedin her company. 'No,' he said. She said: 'You'll pay for this when it comes to drinking to pledges.' In the evening pledges were made. The sacrificial boar was led out, men put their hands on it and then made their vows with the pledging cup. Hedin vowed to have Svava, daughter of Eylimi, the beloved of his brother Helgi, ... (Larrington 129).

83 *Ragnarssona þáttr* is found in Hauksbók which was written in the early fourteenth-century by Haukr Erlendsson. Some scholars believe that Haukr himself composed *Ragnarssona þáttr* (Rowe 228-9).

84 *I(arl) strengði þa þers heit at bragar fvlli at hann skyllði þeim einvm manne gifta dottor sína Þorv er dræpi ormin eda þyrði at ganga til talsvið hana fyrri orminum* (Jónsson 458).

important women offer mead, friendship, and wisdom. In *Skírnismál*, the maiden Gerd offers a formal greeting and mead-cup to Skirnir, and vows on the cup join the god Frey. The motif is turned in *Jómsvíkinga saga*, *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, and *Helgaqviða Hiǫvarðzsonar*, where men vow over *bragarfulls* to claim maidens. Our final example offers a further twist, where a father promises his daughter to any man brave enough to defeat her monstrous serpent.

Conclusion

In the beginning of this investigation we asked what were the key drinking ceremonies of the early middle ages, and how the depiction of those ceremonies changed over time. In the following pages the ceremonies were enumerated, beginning with the seasonal drinking-festivals. The sources present a feasting tradition that met three times annually—in early winter, mid-winter, and mid-summer—according to *Ynglingasaga*, and at Yule, Easter, St John's Mass, and at Michaelmas in the autumn according to *Ágrip*. The *Gulapíng laws* also support this tradition, although it only mentions one feast day for All Saint's Mass. The most important of these feasts—or at least the one most often mentioned—seems to be Yule. The feasting tradition is also supported by the Eddic poems *Hýmiskviða* and *Lokasenna*, which describe the gods participating in a winter *sumbl*. These traditions are supported by the laws found in *Hákonar saga góða* and the *Gulapíng laws*, which dictate that men must make ale for the feasts, or face fines. *Hákonar saga góða* goes on to describe the feasts in great detail and stresses the importance of the libations and the vows that must accompany the sacrifices. Many vows are made over the *bragarfull* and *minni* cups which are dedicated to the gods—both pagan and Christian, depending on the source—the king, and the ancestors. The king, it seems, was expected to lead out in these rituals, and that the *árs ok friðar* of the land was dependent on him doing so. *Fagrskinna* verifies many of the points made in *Hákonar saga góða*, especially stressing the ideas of *árs ok friðar* and the importance of the king's participation in the ritual. The king's position and the law of the land, it seems, were also tied to these feasts and ratified by them.

The exact ages of these sources—their age of composition, that is—are difficult to find. The *Gulapíng laws* and the Eddic poems—which are found in manuscripts from c.1150 and c.1270, respectively—are held by many to be the oldest, representing a pre-literate oral

tradition, the question is a hotly debated one⁸⁵. If the above position is accepted, both sources likely date from before the conversion to Christianity in c.1000. The king's saga compilations come next, beginning with *Ágrip* which was likely composed in c.1190, and found in a manuscript from the early 13th century. *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla* follow in *Ágrip*'s wake, both likely having been composed in the early 13th century. Both compilations probably used *Ágrip* as a source, and it is possible that *Heimskringla* used *Fagrskinna* as source material as well.

From what we can tell, the depictions of the feasts seem to alter little between the sources. The *Gulaping laws*—arguably the oldest and most reliable source—dictates that men must gather together if possible to brew ale and celebrate together (*samburðar ol*). They are to dedicate their festivities to Christ and Mary for *árs ok friðar*. The Eddic poems portray the gods holding *sumbl* drinking-festivals in the winter. *Bragarfull* and *minni* are not mentioned in either the laws or the poems, and neither is *jól*, but the general setting seems to be the same. In *Ágrip*, king Óláfr Tryggvason replaces ancient drinking festivals with new Christian festivals which roughly correspond with the pagan ones seen in *Ynglingasaga*. More detail is given in *Hákonar saga góða*, which says that toasts (*full*) are to be offered at the feasts to the pagan gods, a *bragarfull* toast is to be offered to the king, and *minni* cups are to be raised to the ancestors. These libations are to accompany animal sacrifices and are to secure *árs ok friðar*. *Fagrskinna* asserts that Hákon was lucky for the crops—like the sacral king's in *Ynglingasaga*—and relates his struggles with his pagan followers who demand that he sacrifice for their *árs ok friðar*, and to ratify the law. All of the sources support a tradition of seasonal drinking-festivals, but the information that they provide beyond that varies. The terms *bragarfull* and *minni* are only found in *Hákonar saga góða*, but most of the sources mention *árs ok friðar*.

Funerary feasts are examined next, and here the terms *bragarfull* and *minni* show up more often. Evidence for the importance of funeral feasts and inheritance rituals can be seen as far back as the 4th century on the Tune stone from Norway. A high profile funeral of a Rus chieftain is described by Ibn Fadlān in the late tenth century in what is modern day Russia, and alcohol plays a very large role in the funerary proceedings. *Bragarfulls*, *minnis*, and inheritances are not mentioned in the Ibn Fadlān account, but they play an important role in *Ynglingasaga*, *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, and *Fagrskinna*, which all paint a detailed picture of

85 The oral tradition behind the Eddic poems is particularly controversial. For a comprehensive overview of the issue, see Fidjestøl, “The Dating of Eddic Poetry” (1999).

the *erfi* feast proceedings. When a powerful man has died, his heir is to hold a funeral feast for him within one year of his death. The heir does not come into his full inheritance immediately, though, and must wait for the feast. He must sit on the steps below the high seat until a *bragarfull* cup has been served, where upon he will make a vow—typically swearing to enhance his realm—and then drain the cup. His followers typically join him in this toast. Once that has been done the new leader can claim his full inheritance and the right to sit in the high seat. Lesser *minni* toasts are offered to gods—both Christian and pagan, depending on the source—and to the ancestors as well. This inheritance ceremony can be seen as a form of legitimization and a transfer of power. The new leader reassures his shaken followers that he will be a strong ruler, and they join him in his *bragarfull* toast, giving him their assent and support. We also see in *Adóniass saga*, a much younger source, the *minni* being offered after a battle, likely to the valorous dead.

The sources examined in this section cover a broad time-line. The Tune stone is by far the earliest, hailing from the 4th century, and *Adóniass saga* is the youngest, being composed in the 15th century. The account of Ibn Fadlān lies in the middle, in the late tenth century. The compilations *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla*, as we recall, appeared at about the same time in the early 13th century, and it seems that Snorri used *Fagrskinna* as a source when writing *Heimskringla*.

The evidence for the *erfi* ceremony is rich, but not nearly so conclusive as was that of the seasonal feasts. Funeral feasts are seen to be important throughout the breadth of the Viking world and as far back as four-hundred years before the Viking Age, but that is not a groundbreaking fact in and of itself, as funeral feasts are not a uniquely Nordic concept. The elements that make the Viking Age *erfi* feasts unique—the vows on the *bragarfull* and the ascension to the high seat—are not mentioned on either the Tune stone or in the account of Ibn Fadlān. Both sources could easily fit into the tradition mentioned in the compilations, but they say nothing to verify such a connection. The terms *bragarfull* and *minni* are used heavily in *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla*. *Ynglingasaga* discusses memorial *minni* toasts, and the *bragarfull* cup and vow. Ingjald must make the *bragarfull* toast before he can mount his father's chair. *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* does not use the term *bragarfull*, but instead relies solely on *minni*. Svein offers a *minni* to his late father and vows on it to conquer England. All of his men join him in this *minni* vow. Svein, also, must drink to his father and vow on the *minni* before he can claim his full inheritance. In *Fagrskinna*, memorial *minni* toasts are

offered to gods and kinsmen. The heir must not sit in his father's seat until he had drunk his *bragarfull* toast—also described as a funeral/inheritance toast (*drykki erfit*) in the text. We see great continuity in the rituals described and terms used in *Heimskringla* and *Fagrskinna*, but not so in the other sources. The texts do not contradict each other by any means, but neither do they verify each other.

We next examined the Anglo-Saxon *mead-cup* ritual, its analogues in the Old Norse material, and the association between women and alcohol in the sagas. In *Maxims I* and *Beowulf*, the lady of the household must be wise and courteous, and she must have good rapport with the men of the hall. When she serves mead she must begin with her lord, and then move down through the ranks. This ritual reasserts the group's hierarchy, with the lord—served first—on top, and the other men beneath him. By accepting the lady's mead, the warriors accept the hospitality and supremacy of the lord, and are now in his service. Often the warrior will make a vow when he accepts the cup, boasting of how he will repay the lord for his patronage. These vows have a double purpose, for—if the warrior pulls them off—they will also boost his honor. Through this act the lady fosters peace and solidarity within the warband.

We can see similar actions in the poems *Hýmiskviða*, *Lokasenna* and *Skírnismál*. In the first poem, a Jotunn noblewoman brings beer to the gods Týr and Thor, greets them courteously, and shows wisdom in hiding them from her foolish husband. In *Lokasenna*, the goddess Sif courteously brings Loki a cup of mead and formally welcomes him to the gods' *sumbl*. It is also worth noting that the above poems are linked by *Lokasenna's* prose introduction, and that the gods are meeting for a seasonal-drinking festival, probably *jól*. In *Skírnismál*, the maiden Gerd formally welcomes the emissary Skírnir into her hall and offers him a cup of mead. The drink, in this context, probably also seals her pact with Skírnir. Similar vows are seen in *Jómsvíkinga saga*, *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs*, and *Helgaqviða Hiqvarðzsonar*. In all three cases a warrior swears over a *bragarfull* cup to attain a woman as either a wife or a sexual conquest. These vows are made to enhance the warriors' renown, and are seen in a similar light to those made to the lady with a mead cup. The motif is seen again in a fairytale context in *Ragnarssona þáttr*, where a jarl promises the hand of his daughter to any man brave enough to defeat her guardian serpent.

The sources here seem to lie in two categories, those composed before c.1000, and those composed after. Both *Maxims I* and *Beowulf* hail back to c.1000 at least, with the

possibility of being several hundred years older (*Maxims I* c.700-c.900, and *Beowulf* c.625-1025). The Eddic poems *Hýmiskviða*, *Lokasenna*, *Skírnismál* and *Helgaqviða Hiǫvarðssonar* might also date back to the years before 1000, although their written forms are only found in later manuscripts (primarily Codex Regius, penned in the 1270s). The other sources are later, with *Jómsvíkinga saga* likely composed in c.1200, and *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs*, which comes to us from the 13th century. *Ragnarssona þáttr* is the youngest of the sources, appearing in Hauksbók in c.1300.

In these sources we see a strong association between women and alcohol. In the Anglo-Saxon sources, an ideal lady is defined: she is courteous and she serves mead to the men in the hall, and her ritual stabilizes the warband and brings peace. The same is seen in *Hýmiskviða*, *Lokasenna*, *Skírnismál*, where these idealized women continue to serve alcohol and foster peace. *Bragarfull* and *minni* are not mentioned in the poems, but we find *sumbl* and a winter seasonal drinking-festival in both *Hýmiskviða* and *Lokasenna*. The terms do appear in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs*, *Helgaqviða Hiǫvarðssonar*, and *Ragnarssona þáttr*. At a *jól* drinking festival in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs*, a warrior swears in his *bragarfull* boast to claim a bride. In almost exactly the same setting—at a *jól* feast and over a *bragarfull* cup—another warrior claims a woman in *Helgaqviða Hiǫvarðssonar*. In *Ragnarssona þáttr*, a jarl solemnly promises his daughter's hand over his *bragarfull* vow. The term *minni* does not appear in any of the sources, but that makes sense as it is the *bragarfull* toast that typically accompanies vows.

The association between drinking-ceremonies and social maintenance and development is striking. In the primary drinking-traditions examined—the seasonal feasts, funeral feasts, and *mead-cup* ritual—social unity and solidarity has always been the point. In the seasonal drinking-festivals we see a regular and ordered venue for social interaction, where communities would gather to remember their past with memorial *minnis* and to ensure their future with toasts for *árs ok friðar*. The local leaders hosted these feasts and reaffirmed their positions in society, as did the king who oversaw the feasts. The people would toast the king by raising the king's cup (*bragarfull*), and thereby reassert their support for him and for his laws. These feasts were also places where vows could be made publicly, as we saw with the warrior's who swore on the *bragarfull* cups to claim certain maidens.

In the *erfi* funeral feasts we see a ceremony aimed at reassurance and the transfer of power. The ancestors and the gods are remembered and honored with memorial *minnis*, and

the late lord most of all with the *bragarfull* toast made by his heir. In his vow, the heir would promise to enhance his realm—to be a strong leader. These vows also served as state policy announcements, informing the people of their new leader's intentions. The people would join the heir in this vow, thereby giving him their loyalty. These ceremonies formalized transitions, and offered impromptu opportunities for communities to gather together. The *mead-cup* ritual, in its entirety, is a ceremony for bolstering group cohesion. The lady, a mediator, serves mead to the men of the hall, binding them to her lord in service, and she elicits from them vows of fealty. It is the lady's job to calm tempers and to hearten the guests in her hall.

There is also a strong link between drink and solemn vows. In almost every instance we a *strengja heit* accompanying a *bragarfull* or a *minni*. King's vow to expand their domains, and warriors vow to increase their renown, whether by heroic deeds or wife-claiming, or by a combination of the two. Men cement pacts and swear allegiance to the gods and king over their cups. The drink formalizes the vow, and strengthens its bond. Vows made on the *bragarfull* are sacred, and not to be taken lightly.

The depictions of ceremonial drinking change over time, but not drastically. Seasonal drinking-festivals are depicted throughout the period, from the likely pre-Christian winter *sumbl* of the gods in the *Poetic Edda*, to the *Jól* feast seen in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* from the 13th century. The *mead-cup* ritual is mostly seen in the older sources from before the year 1000, and does not alter much between the sources, although the amount of detail given certainly does. Funeral feasts are mentioned as far back as the fourth-century, and as recently—albeit vaguely—as the fifteenth-century, and as far abroad as tenth-century Russia. In both feast cases (seasonal and funeral), however, our most detailed accounts are given in thirteenth-century sources. *Ágrip*, *Fagrskinna*, and *Heimskringla* are largely in accord, but given that they likely used each other as source material, their correlation does not strengthen our argument as much as it could. One of the latest sources—early 14th century—to describe vows made over a *bragarfull* cup is *Ragnarssona þáttr*, and although the story itself is very fanciful, the act of the vow itself remains true to the other depictions.

As we recall, Bjørn Qviller argues that it was the production and sharing of alcohol that fostered the development of early societies. It would seem that such was still the case in early Medieval and Viking Age Scandinavia and England. The ceremonies that we have examined all serve to foster and strengthen social bonds. The seasonal and funeral feasts both

provided social venues for people to come together and interact, and the *mead-cup* ritual bolstered the solidarity of those present. The drinking-ceremonies added form and meaning to the gatherings, and added extra weight and importance to the vows and decisions made. In fact, libations marked almost every important social action, such as the ascension of kings, and the ratification of laws. They were used to worship deities, to remember the ancestral dead, and to secure a coming year of *árs ok friðar*. They dignified vows and sealed pacts, and they reaffirmed social hierarchy. These libations are so intrinsically tied to formal social ceremony, that it is almost impossible to picture the Viking Age without them.

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