

Old Norse Drinking Culture

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Abstract:

This thesis examines the production, consumption and symbolic aspects of alcoholic beverages in the West Norse world mainly during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Chapter 1 is the introduction, source and methodology description. Chapter 2 is devoted to the study of the main types of alcoholic beverages available during these centuries as well as to the production and acquisition of both the raw materials and tools to produce them. Chapter 3 studies the mythological origins and symbolism attached to these beverages, with the main focus on mead. Chapter 4 analyzes the different contexts in which alcohol was consumed during the period under research. Chapter 5 studies the main occasions on which alcohol was consumed. Chapters 6 and 7 approach the uses of alcohol as a tool for acquiring and displaying power. Chapter 6 is devoted to the analysis of alcohol as a way of displaying and acquiring power through the display and offering of both alcoholic beverages and drinking vessels as well as through drinking competitions. Finally, Chapter 7 studies the ways in which alcohol could be used as a tool of deception and personal enhancement. These topics are analyzed using literary, legal, historical and archaeological sources.

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CONVENTIONS

Throughout my thesis I have used the standard editions of Old Norse texts. The *Íslendinga sǫgur*, *Heimskringla* and *Landnámabók* editions that I have used are those published in the *Íslensk Fornrit* collection. My references to the *Fornaldar sǫgur* follow Guðni Jónsson's four-volume *Fornaldar Sögur Norðurlanda* and my references to the *Sturlunga saga* compilation come from Jón Jóhannesson's two-volume edition. *Flateyjarbók* will be quoted following Sigurður Nordal's 1944 edition. Any other saga texts will be provided in the bibliography. My references to Snorri's *Edda* come from Hans Kuhn's *Edda; Die Lieder Des Codex Regius Nebst Verwandten Denkmälern*. Sagas, even when the name of the author is known, will be quoted by providing the abbreviated name of the saga in italics and the chapter number in roman numbers, followed by the pages in which the reference is to be found in the standard edition in Arabic numbers. Eddic sources will be quoted providing either the abbreviated name of the poem in italics followed by the stanza number in Arabic numbers or, when it comes to Snorri's *Edda*, by providing the abbreviated name of the book's section –*Prologus*, *Gylfaginning*, *Skáldskaparmál* or *Háttatal* – followed by the chapter in Arabic numbers and by the page number where the reference can be found. Norwegian charters and legal sources will be quoted from the six-volume *Norges Gamle Love* started by R. Keyser and P. A. Munch in 1846, and the 21-volume *Diplomatarium Norvegicum. Diplomatarium Islandicum* will be quoted from the 10-volume edition initiated by Jón Sigurðsson in 1857. *Grágás* will be quoted from Gunnar Karlsson's 1992 edition for Mál og Menning. For these texts I will provide the abbreviated title of the book in italics, followed by the volume number in roman numerals and, finally, in Arabic numbers, the reference to the page in which the charter or law is to be found in the standard edition. Other primary and

secondary sources will be quoted following the standards set in *MHRA Style Guide*. Icelandic authors will be quoted by first name and then patronymic, as is the convention.

When confronted with different spellings for the same word I will follow the spelling as provided in the primary source in which it appears. For my translations I will follow what Kennedy calls ‘the future of saga translations’ where a “clear trend in saga translation today is to demand more from the reader than is asked by a magazine article or a typical novel on sale at an airport shop”¹. As a lover of the Old Norse language I agree with the fact that “in an age when political developments have given a new urgency to understanding philosophies and lifestyles strikingly different from those which now prevail in Western societies, it seems unlikely that translators from very different times and places will generally feel disposed to translate them [the sagas] in a way suggesting that what is unfamiliar in them [the sagas] is of no consequence or should where possible be obscured from the reader’s attention.”² Hence, my translations pay careful attention to representing the mentality and ideology of the Old Norse language while at the same time I try to render them in a form that results perfectly intelligible in Modern English. On some occasions they may sound a bit alien, but since this work is about the Old Norse society, and understanding their language is another way of approaching the culture that created the texts analyzed in this thesis. All translations are mine, unless otherwise stated.

¹ John Kennedy, *Translating the Sagas: Two Hundred Years of Challenge and Response, Making the Middle Ages, 5* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), p. 187.

² Kennedy, p. 187.

Abbreviations:

The list of abbreviations follows, when possible, the *sigla* provided by the *Registre* of the *Ordbog over det Norrøne Prosasprog* and, by Neckel and Kuhn in their edition of the *Edda*. Other abbreviations follow a similar logic to that of these two systems. Alternative titles are provided in brackets.

All references to dictionaries and to primary sources in Old Norse are given in an abbreviated form.

Primary Sources:

<i>Ágr</i>	<i>Ágrip af Noregskonungasögum</i>
<i>Akv</i>	<i>Atlaqviða in Grænlensca (Atlakviða)</i>
<i>Alv</i>	<i>Alvíssmá</i>
<i>Am</i>	<i>Atlamál in grænlensco</i>
<i>Ar</i>	<i>Arons saga</i>
<i>Ásm</i>	<i>Ásmundar saga kappabana</i>
<i>Band</i>	<i>Bandamanna saga</i>
<i>Bárð</i>	<i>Bárðar saga</i>
<i>Bdr</i>	<i>Baldrs Draumar</i>
<i>BjH</i>	<i>Bjarnar saga Hitdælakappa</i>
<i>Boll</i>	<i>Bolla þátr</i>
<i>Bós</i>	<i>Bósa saga ok Herrauds</i>
<i>Brandkr</i>	<i>Brandkrossa þátr</i>
<i>Nj</i>	<i>Brennu-Njáls saga</i>
<i>DI</i>	<i>Diplomatarium Islandicum</i>
<i>DN</i>	<i>Diplomatarium Norvegicum.</i>
<i>Dpl</i>	<i>Droplaugarsona saga</i>
<i>Eb</i>	<i>Eyrbyggja saga</i>
<i>Eg</i>	<i>Egils Saga Skalla-Grimssonar</i>
<i>EgÁsm</i>	<i>Egils saga Einhenda ok Ásmundar Berserkjabana</i>
<i>Eir</i>	<i>Eiríks saga Rauða</i>
<i>Eksm</i>	<i>Eiríksmál</i>
<i>Eym</i>	<i>Eymundar þátr Hringssonar</i>
<i>Fbr</i>	<i>Fóstbræðra saga</i>
<i>Finnb</i>	<i>Finnboga saga</i>
<i>Flj</i>	<i>Fljótsdæla saga</i>
<i>Flóam</i>	<i>Flóamanna saga</i>
<i>Fm</i>	<i>Fáfnismál</i>
<i>Frið</i>	<i>Friðþjofs saga ins frækna</i>
<i>Fsk</i>	<i>Fagrskinna</i>
<i>Gautr</i>	<i>Gautreks saga</i>
<i>Gðr II</i>	<i>Guðrúnarkviða qnnor (Guðrúnarkviða II)</i>
<i>GHr</i>	<i>Göngu-Hrólfs saga</i>
<i>Gísl</i>	<i>Gísla saga Súrssonar</i>
<i>Glúm</i>	<i>Víga-Glúms saga</i>
<i>Gr</i>	<i>Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar</i>
<i>Grg</i>	<i>Grágás</i>
<i>Grm</i>	<i>Grimnismál</i>
<i>Grp</i>	<i>Gripisspá</i>

<i>Grøn</i>	<i>Grænendinga saga</i>
<i>GrønI</i>	<i>Grænendinga þáttur</i>
<i>GuðAr</i>	<i>Guðmundar saga Arasonar</i>
<i>GuðDý</i>	<i>Guðmundar saga dýra</i>
<i>GullÁsuÞ</i>	<i>Gull-Ásu-Þórðar Þáttur</i>
<i>GullÞ</i>	<i>Gull-Þóris saga (Þorskfirðinga saga)</i>
<i>GunnK</i>	<i>Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfjfls</i>
<i>GunnI</i>	<i>Gunnlaugs saga Ormstungu</i>
<i>Hálf</i>	<i>Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka</i>
<i>HálfEyst</i>	<i>Hálfðanar saga Eysteinssonar</i>
<i>Hallfr</i>	<i>Hallfreðar saga</i>
<i>Halls</i>	<i>Halldórs þáttur Snorrasonar inn Síðari</i>
<i>Harð</i>	<i>Harðar saga</i>
<i>Háv</i>	<i>Hávamál</i>
<i>HávÍs</i>	<i>Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings</i>
<i>Hdl</i>	<i>Hyndlolióð (Hyndlulíóð)</i>
<i>Hðg</i>	<i>Heiðreksgátur</i>
<i>Heið</i>	<i>Heiðarvíga saga;</i>
<i>Heiðr</i>	<i>Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks</i>
<i>Helg</i>	<i>Helga þáttur Þórissonar</i>
<i>Herv</i>	<i>Hervararkviða</i>
<i>HG</i>	<i>Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar</i>
<i>HH</i>	<i>Helgaqviða Hundingsbana in fyrri</i> <i>(Helgakviða Hundingsbana I)</i>
<i>HHII</i>	<i>Helgaqviða Hundingsbana qnnor</i> <i>(Helgakviða Hundingsbana II)</i>
<i>HjQ</i>	<i>Hjálmþés saga ok Ölvis</i>
<i>Hlqð</i>	<i>Hlqðskviða</i>
<i>Hm</i>	<i>Hamðismál</i>
<i>Hrafñ</i>	<i>Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar</i>
<i>Hrbl</i>	<i>Hárbarðzlióð (Hárbarðslióð)</i>
<i>Hrólf</i>	<i>Hrólfs saga kraka ok kapp.a hans</i>
<i>Hym</i>	<i>Hymiskviða (Hymiskviða)</i>
<i>Høns</i>	<i>Hænsa-Þóris saga</i>
<i>Ísl</i>	<i>Íslendinga saga</i>
<i>Jb</i>	<i>Jónsbók</i>
<i>Jvs</i>	<i>Jómsvíkinga saga</i>
<i>Jqkul</i>	<i>Jökuls þáttur Búasonar</i>
<i>Kjaln</i>	<i>Kjalnesinga saga</i>
<i>Korm</i>	<i>Kormaks saga</i>
<i>Krók</i>	<i>Króka-Refs saga</i>
<i>Laxd</i>	<i>Laxdæla saga</i>
<i>Ldn</i>	<i>Landnámabók</i>
<i>Ljósv</i>	<i>Ljósvefninga saga</i>
<i>Ls</i>	<i>Locasenna (Lokasenna)</i>
<i>NGL</i>	<i>Norges Gamle Love</i>
<i>Orkn</i>	<i>Orkneyinga saga</i>
<i>ÓTFlat</i>	<i>Ólafs saga Tryggvassonar, Flateyjarbók</i>
<i>PrestGuð</i>	<i>Prestssaga Guðmundar góða</i>
<i>Ragn</i>	<i>Ragnars saga loðbrókar</i>

<i>Reykd</i>	<i>Reykdæla saga ok Víga Skútu</i>
<i>Rþ</i>	<i>Rígsþula</i>
<i>Sd</i>	<i>Sigrdrifomál (Sigrdrifumál)</i>
<i>Skm</i>	<i>For Scírnis (Skírnismál)</i>
<i>SmB</i>	<i>Smákaflar ok Brot</i>
<i>Snegl</i>	<i>Sneglu-Halla þátr</i>
<i>Strl</i>	<i>Sturlu saga</i>
<i>StrlÞ</i>	<i>Sturlu þátr</i>
<i>Sv</i>	<i>Sverris saga</i>
<i>Svarfd</i>	<i>Svarfdæla saga</i>
<i>SqrlaSt</i>	<i>Sörla saga sterka</i>
<i>Vall</i>	<i>Valla-Ljóts saga</i>
<i>Vápnf</i>	<i>Vápnfirðinga saga</i>
<i>Vatn</i>	<i>Vatnsdæla saga</i>
<i>Vigl</i>	<i>Víglundar saga</i>
<i>Vkv</i>	<i>Vqlundarqviða (Vqlundarkviða)</i>
<i>Vm</i>	<i>Vafðrúðnismál (Vafþrúðnismál)</i>
<i>Vsp</i>	<i>Vqlospá (Vqluspá)</i>
<i>Vqð</i>	<i>Vqðu-Brands þátr</i>
<i>Vqls</i>	<i>Völsunga saga</i>
<i>Vqlsa</i>	<i>Vqlsa þátr</i>
<i>YngV</i>	<i>Yngvars saga Viðförla</i>
<i>ÞHvít</i>	<i>Þorsteins saga Hvíta</i>
<i>Þórð</i>	<i>Þórðar saga hreðu</i>
<i>ÞórðK</i>	<i>Þórðar saga kakala</i>
<i>ÞorHaf</i>	<i>Þorgils saga ok Hafliða</i>
<i>ÞorSk</i>	<i>Þorgils saga skarða</i>
<i>ÞorstBm</i>	<i>Þorsteins þátr bæjarmagns</i>
<i>ÞorstVik</i>	<i>Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar</i>
<i>Þrk</i>	<i>Þrymsqviða (Þrymskviða)</i>
<i>ÞUxaf</i>	<i>Þorsteins þátr Uxafóts</i>
<i>Qlk</i>	<i>Qlkofra þátr</i>
<i>Qrv</i>	<i>Örvar-Odds saga</i>

Works by Snorri Sturluson

<i>Gylf</i>	<i>Edda: Gylfaginning</i>
<i>HakG</i>	<i>Hákonar saga góða</i>
<i>Hát</i>	<i>Edda: Háttatal</i>
<i>HkrProl</i>	<i>Prologus</i>
<i>Magn</i>	<i>Magnússona saga</i>
<i>ÓH</i>	<i>Óláfs saga Helga</i>
<i>ÓK</i>	<i>Óláfs saga kyrra</i>
<i>Skspm</i>	<i>Edda; Skáldskaparmál</i>
<i>Yng</i>	<i>Ynglinga saga</i>

Reference Books

- AEW* de Vries, Jan, *Altnordisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1977)
- CEP* Kellogg, Robert, *A Concordance to Eddic Poetry*, Medieval Texts and Studies, 2 (East Lansing, Michigan: Colleagues Press, 1988)
- DNM* Simek, Rudolf, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, trans. by Angela Hall (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1993)
- DNML* Orchard, Andy, *Dictionary of Norse Myth and Legend* (London: Cassel, 1997)
- IED* Cleasby, Richard, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, 2nd edn, rev. by G. Vigfusson, sup. by W. Craigie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957)
- IEW* Alexander Jóhannesson, *Isländisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 2 vols (Bern: Francke Verlag, 1951-56)
- LexPoet* Sveinbjörn Egilsson, *Lexicon Poeticum Antiquæ Linguæ Septentrionalis: Ordbog Over det Norsk-Islandske Skjaldesprog*, ed. by Finnur Jónsson, 2nd ed (København: S.L. Møllers Bogtrykkeri, 1966)
- NGLGlos* Storm, Gustav and E. Hertzberg, *Glossarium med Registre*, in *Norges Gamle Love indtil 1387: Ifølge Offentlig Foranstaltning og Tillige med Understøttelse ad det Kongelige Norske Videnskabers Selskab*, 5, ed. by R. Keyser and P. A. Munch, 6 vols (Christiania: Chr. Grøndahl Trykkery, 1895)
- OED* *Oxford English Dictionary*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), <http://oed.com>
- OGNS* Fritzner, Johan, *Ordbog over det Gamle Norske Sprog*, 4 vols (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1973)
- ONP* *Ordbog over det Norrøne Prosasprog (A Dictionary of Old Norse Prose)*, ed. by Den Arnamagnæanske Kommission, <http://www.onp.hum.ku.dk/webmenue.htm>
- OrðT* *Íslendinga Sögur: Orðstöðulykill og Texti* (The Complete Sagas of Icelanders with Lemmatized Concordance), ed. by Bragi Halldórsson and others, CD ROM (Reykjavík: Mál og Menning, 1996)

CHAPTER 1– INTRODUCTION

While writing my thesis on Old Norse drinking culture I normally received two different reactions to my subject of study while discussing it with friends or fellow scholars. The first is a generalized belief that the Norse were great drinkers. The second, and most usual response, is the belief that my research involved mainly ‘lots of practical research’ and few hours spent without a pint at hand doing proper academic work. It seems, in general, that alcoholic drinks tend to be associated more with fun than with academic research. But alcohol has been a topic of study for a long time. For much of this period, the historical study of alcoholic beverages has been mainly a field of popular research, aimed more to the general beer and/or wine connoisseur than to the academic community.¹ But in recent years the study of drinking and feasting has become a more serious topic of research among scholars of different fields. There have been general studies about the history and sociology of alcohol,² studies about drinking in the Classical World,³ publications about drinking and feasting the Middle Ages in general⁴ as well as particular medieval societies.⁵ Among these last, publications concerning Northern Germanic drinking culture have focused mostly on the Anglo-Saxon world with slight references to Medieval Scandinavia.⁶ Alcoholic beverages have

¹ For example, see A. E. Richardson, *The Old Inns of England* (London: B.T. Batsford Ltd., 1934); Frederic W. Hackwood, *Inns, Ales and Drinking Customs of Old England* (London: Bracken Books, 1985); Martha Carlin and J. T. Rosenthal, *Food and Eating in Medieval Europe* (London: Hambledon Press, 1998); Martyn Cornell, *Beer: The History of the Pint* (London: Headline, 2003) and; Stephen Pollington, *The Mead-Hall: Feasting in Anglo-Saxon England* (Norfolk: Anglo-Saxon Books, 2003).

² For example, see Ian S. Hornsey, *A History of Beer and Brewing*, RSC Paperbacks (Cambridge: Royal Society of Chemistry, 2003) and; Bjørn Qviller, *Russens Historie* (Oslo: Det Norske Samlaget, 1996).

³ For example, see Andrew Dalby, *Siren Feasts: A History of Food and Gastronomy in Greece* (London: Routledge, 1996); Jaques André, *L’Alimentation et la Cuisine à Rome* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1981) and; Max Nelson, *The Barbarian Beverage: A History of Beer in Ancient Europe* (London: Routledge, 2005).

⁴ For example, see Andrew Cowell, *At Play in the Tavern: Signs, Coins, and Bodies in the Middle Ages* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999); Bonnie Effros, *Creating Community with Food and Drink in Merovingian Gaul* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002) and; Richard Unger, *Beer in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

⁵ For example, see Maria Dembińska, *Food and Drink in Medieval Poland: Rediscovering a Cuisine of the Past* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).

⁶ For example, see Ann Hagen, *A Handbook of Anglo-Saxon Food: Processing and Consumption* (Hockwold-cum-Wilton: Anglo-Saxon Books, 1992); Ann Hagen, *A Second Handbook of Anglo-Saxon Food and Drink: Production and Distribution* (Hockwold-cum-Wilton: Anglo-Saxon Books, 1995); Michael J. Enright, *Lady with a Mead Cup: Ritual, Prophecy and Lordship in the European Warband*

also been the topic of at least one international conference, namely the International Congress on Beer in Prehistory and Antiquity, held by the University Barcelona in October, 2004. However, a book-length study about Old Norse drinking has been long overdue within the tradition of alcohol studies. So far, apart from brief references to Old Norse drinking culture made in studies about other Germanic cultures, most Scandinavianists have centred mainly on the problems concerning the myth of the mead of poetry, as narrated in both *Eddas*. Alcohol production and consumption in Medieval Scandinavia have been studied in several articles and book chapters but, again, no book-length studies have been published on this topic. Most of all, there have not been any lengthy studies contrasting evidence from different fields of knowledge in the West Norse world. This thesis is, then, an attempt to fill in such gaps. Many of the topics that I will approach in my thesis have not been previously researched, or at least they have not been approached taking into consideration the role of alcohol and drinking as a relevant subject. For example, the *erfi*, or funeral feast, has been previously studied⁷ though from a linguistic point of view and not taking into account the role that drinking had in the ritual. Thus, my study will predominantly rely on primary sources and to a lesser extent on previous research. Taking into account the virtual lack of specialized publications on the topic of Old Norse alcohol production and consumption, my study will be both descriptive and analytical, as one of my main aims is to gather primary sources of different natures to allow a comparative approach to the social history of Old Norse drinking.

from *La Tène to the Viking Age*. (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996); Christina Lee, *Feasting the Dead: Food and Drink in Anglo-Saxon Burial Rituals*, Anglo-Saxon Studies, 9 (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2007); Hugh Magennis, *Anglo-Saxon Appetites: Food and Drink and their Consumption in Old English and Related Literature* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1999) and; the doctoral thesis by Alban Gautier, *Le Festin dans l'Angleterre Anglo-Saxonne (v-xi siècle)* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2006).

⁷ For example, see Ottar Grønvik, 'The Words for 'Heir', 'Inheritance' and 'Funeral Feast' in Early Germanic: an Etymological Study of *Arfr* m, *Arfi* m, *Erfi* n, *Erfa* vb and the Corresponding Words in the other Germanic Dialects', *Norske Videnskaps -Akademi Avhandlingar 2 Hist.-Filos. Klasse Avhandlingar*, Ny Serie, 18 (1982), 6-19.

This study will deal mainly with alcohol, its production, its symbolic value, and the contexts in which it was consumed in the West Norse world during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. I have chosen this time-span for my research because it was precisely during this period that Old Norse literature and other written historical texts flourished. And I have chosen to focus my study on the West Norse area because it was precisely in Iceland and Norway that most of these texts were written down. I aim for my thesis to be interdisciplinary; for this I will rely heavily on written – literary, legal and historical – sources as well as on archaeological evidence and, whenever possible, I will contrast the evidence that they bring forward. My use of the sources will vary according to the nature of the questions I intend to answer in each chapter. Having been trained as a historian and as a literary critic, I will rely heavily on the different written sources, though I have also brought into discussion archaeological and linguistic evidence, albeit to a lesser extent.

My written sources are mainly of three different kinds: literary, historical and legal. The literary sources used for this study are basically eddas and sagas. In my approach to the literary sources I will largely ignore the endless debate between the bookprose and freeprose theorists.⁸ For the purpose of my analysis, the fact that sagas - and eddas too- might be the written result of a long-lasting oral tradition or the result of artistic creativity is mostly irrelevant. My idea is to bring forward a study about the thirteenth and fourteenth century's use, perception and symbolism of alcohol. Thus, following Gísli Pálsson, I believe that "the sagas [and eddas] are potentially valuable ethnographic documents with various kinds of information on early Iceland and medieval Scandinavia."⁹ Whether the sagas and eddas provide or not historical information about the societies they describe, I will try to use these sources to extract

⁸ For the latest study in this topic see Gísli Sigurðsson, *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition: A Discourse on Method*, trans. by Nicholas Jones, Publications of the Millman Parry Collection of Oral Literature, 2 (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2004).

⁹ Gísli Pálsson, 'Introduction: Text, Life, and Saga', in *From Sagas to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland*, ed. by Gísli Pálsson (Middlesex, Enfield Lock: Hisarlik Press, 1992), pp. 1-25 (p. 1).

information about the societies that created them - that is, thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Iceland and Norway. As Gísli Pálsson puts it:

The Icelandic sagas have been extensively studied as pieces of text – as literary and historical documents- by generations of saga scholars. Despite its progress and insights in some respects, this scholarly tradition has remained relatively silent on many pertinent and important issues, particularly social and comparative approaches.¹⁰

Thus, in this study I will try to follow the school of thought proposed by Gísli Pálsson, and approach my literary sources as an instrument to expand our social understanding and decode the social and symbolic attitudes towards alcohol during the period in which the sagas and eddas were written down and not as a historical tool to understand the societies they describe. My approach to the sagas and eddas will be, then, to consider them as texts meant to be understood and decodified by a thirteenth- and fourteenth-century audience, for “by the time these stories were written, Icelandic attitudes had been moulded by Christian values, and for the saga authors and their public the pagan period was a remote and unfamiliar world, which they could understand and interpret in their own terms.”¹¹ That is, the sagas can only be understood and decodified taking into account the values and mentality of the period in which they were produced. Even if the sagas have an antiquarian interest and actually depict accurate historic events or not, the set of values they convey should have been comprehensible to their thirteenth- and fourteenth-century audience. As we will see, in the sagas drinking is always portrayed as a communal act - there are no lonely drinkers in Old Norse literature - and drinking transcends its biological role of quenching thirst and is portrayed mainly as a symbolic act rather than as a physical need. Thus, taking into consideration the symbolism surrounding the act of drinking, I will consider that even if a story about a feast or a drinking scene managed to survive several hundred years through oral tradition, the

¹⁰ Gísli Pálsson, p. 1.

¹¹ Hermann Pálsson, *Art and Ethics in Hrafnkel's Saga* (Copenhagen: Munksgard, 1971), p. 10.

symbolism involved in the scene was somehow meaningful to a thirteenth- and fourteenth-century audience.

I have basically three main objectives in this study. The first is to show that alcohol in the West Norse world was a rather expensive commodity, not available to all, as was the case on the continent. The second is to prove that the rarity and high value of alcohol led to a symbolic portrayal of drinking scenes in the literary sources, which can actually be corroborated in the historical and legal sources. Alcohol was a luxury that only few could afford, display and offer. All literary, legal, historical and archaeological sources point in the same direction: alcohol was a commodity that few could afford, and those who could, used it in their advantage. My third main objective is to explore the sources and bring out a new reading of saga literature and thirteenth- and fourteenth-century West Norse texts based on the symbolism of feasting, drinking and drunkenness. This symbolic representation of communal drinking can be quite informative not primarily of the Viking past, but rather of the writing or composing present of the period in which the sagas were committed to parchment. Sagas can help us to understand the way in which thirteenth- and fourteenth-century saga composers and law compilers saw and idealized their past and perceived their present. In brief, my third purpose is to approach the literary sources, by contrasting them with legal and historical sources, as a tool to understand the dreams, ideals, and wishes of the West Norse world as manifested through its alcoholic imagery.

My main saga sources are the *Íslendinga sqgur*, the *Fornaldar sqgur* and the *Sturlunga saga* compilation. The *Íslendinga sqgur*, also known as *Sagas of Icelanders* or *Family Sagas*, were mostly composed during the thirteenth and fourteenth century and narrate events that took place around the period in which Iceland was settled in the late ninth century until roughly the middle of the eleventh century, or the so called, 'saga age'. The *Fornaldar sqgur* (literally *Sagas of Ancient Times*), also known as

Mythical, Heroical or Legendary sagas, were also written down mostly during the late thirteenth century and the fourteenth century. This saga genre narrates events that took place prior to the settlement of Iceland. They deal chiefly with stories of legendary kings or heroes and their stories make great use of fantastic elements. Due to their fantastic nature the *Fornaldar sqgur* have been generally underestimated as a subject of research, mainly because the general trend has been to use sagas as a historical tool for the study of the Viking age. However, Torfi Tulinius has recently brought them back into the academic scene by arguing that “the legendary sagas, despite their fictional nature, teach us about Icelandic society – not as it was, but as it saw itself, and above all as it wished to be.”¹² Thus, with his *The Matter of the North; The Rise of Literary Fiction in Thirteenth-Century Iceland* Tulinius legitimated the *Fornaldar Sqgur* as a valuable tool to understand the society in which they were composed. This is precisely the way in which the *Fornaldar sqgur* will be approached throughout this study. And, as we will see, when it comes to the portrayal of alcohol and drinking, they actually seem to depict thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Icelandic customs and ideals. Finally, my other main saga source is the *Sturlunga saga* compilation. These sagas were written down around the year 1300 and narrate events that took place in Iceland during the late twelfth and early thirteenth century. Due to the proximity between the events they narrate and the period of their composition they are normally considered to be of great historical value. However, my approach to them will not be mainly historical but sociological. I will use other saga sources, such as Snorri Sturluson’s *Heimskringla*, a large compilation of sagas narrating the lives of the Norwegian Kings; *Fagrskinna*; *Flateyjarbók*; several *Íslendinga þættir*, or *Stories of Icelanders*; and *Ágrip af Nóregskonungasqgum*, albeit to a lesser extent. For this study I will rely mostly on the *Fornaldar sqgur*, *Íslendinga saga* and the *Sturlunga saga* compilation. I decided to use

¹² Torfi H. Tulinius, *The matter of the North: The Rise of Literary Fiction in Thirteenth-Century Iceland*, trans. by Randi C. Eldevik, The Viking Collection, 13 (Odense: Odense University Press, 2002), p. 13.

these last three saga genres as my main sources because they clearly portray and differentiate the perception that the saga writers had about three different epochs: the period before the settling of Iceland, the age of settlement, and collapse of the Icelandic commonwealth. As we will see, the depiction of the use and symbolism of alcoholic drinks in these three periods - far past, recent past and almost contemporary events- does actually seem to represent the ideals and reality of the attitudes towards alcohol of the society that created them.

Both the *Poetic Edda* and Snorri's *Edda* are my main sources for Old Norse mythology. However, one should take into consideration that these two sources differ in nature. The *Poetic Edda* is a compilation of several texts gathered in Gks 2365 4to, also known as *Codex Regius*, written around 1270-1280 but believed to have its sources in an older manuscript. It comprises 29 poems, some of which are believed to have been composed before the Christianization of Scandinavia, though the date of the composition of the individual poems has been the source of much debate.¹³ Snorri's *Edda* is no less problematic. This text, composed in the early thirteenth century by Snorri Sturluson, was intended mainly as a manual for contemporary poets so that they could understand the mythic background of many of the *kenningar* they were composing and/or transmitting. However, even if this source intends to instruct contemporary poets on ancient lore, one should take into consideration that the book was composed and codified by a thirteenth-century Christian Icelander. From the very prologue to his book, Snorri clearly expresses his euhemeristic approach to the texts that he will interpret for future scholars. And, it is not certain if Snorri's interpretations of the 'ancient' texts transmitted to him have been correctly understood and/or decodified for his contemporaries. As we will see in Chapter 3, there are great issues to take into consideration if one is to take Snorri's texts as a reliable source for Old Norse

¹³ On this topic see Bjarne Fidjestøl, *The Dating of Eddic Poetry*, Bibliotheca Arnarnagnæana, 41 (Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzelsforlag, 1999).

mythology. The main problem I confronted when approaching these texts is that current scholarship recurs to Snorri in order to interpret the mythical lays of the *Poetic Edda* and vice versa, leading to, in my opinion, a series of false assumptions about the mythic roles and origins of alcoholic beverages.¹⁴ From the beginning of his *Edda* as well as from the beginning of his *Ynglinga saga* - the opening and mythological introduction to Snorri's *Heimskringla* - Snorri shows an euhemeristic approach as well as strong compromise with Christian values. Thus, just as with the sagas, one should consider Snorri's *Edda* and *Ynglinga saga* as texts composed by a thirteenth-century Christian to be interpreted and efficiently decoded by other thirteenth-century Christian Icelanders. They offer a Christian, even if well-informed, view and interpretation of a past that was no longer understood during the period of their composition. Thus, Snorri's *Edda* will be considered together with the sagas, as a well-informed Christian anthropological interpretation of the pre-Christian past.

My main historical sources are the *Diplomatarium Norvegicum* and the *Diplomatarium Islandicum*. *Diplomatarium Norvegicum* is a 21-volume compilation of nearly 20,000 Norwegian charters dating from 1050 to 1590 and *Diplomatarium Islandicum* is an 11-volume collection of Icelandic and Norwegian charters dating from 834 to 1544. The legal sources that I have used are mainly *Norges Gamle Love*, which gathers the earliest Norwegian laws up to 1370 and *Grágás*, a compilation of Icelandic laws from the Commonwealth Period. I will also use *Jónsbók*, which is basically an adaptation of the Norwegian laws made for Iceland once the north Atlantic island lost its independence and became a colony of Norway in 1262-64. These sources are not unproblematic. One should consider to what extent charters actually provide an actual depiction of Norwegian and Icelandic society. Also, does a law actually reflect the attempt to control a generalized problem or should it be considered as an attempt to

¹⁴ This idea will be discussed in Chapter 3.

prevent a foreseen, yet not real, problem? Was a law approved due to a sporadic breach of public order or was it the reflection of an endemic breach? These questions are difficult to answer; in my thesis I will not try to answer them but I will endeavour not to generalize based on what we believe to be ‘historical evidence’. Out of the plethora of charters and laws and charters regarding alcohol consumption, sales and import, I have been selective and careful in my approach. Most of all, I have tried not to make assumptions based on isolated sources. Whenever possible, I have tried to contrast legal, historical, archaeological and literary evidence and bring all of them forward at the same time so as to prove or disprove their reliability. I have also tried to contrast discrepancies or coincidences that may lead us to believe that we are actually confronting an actual historical fact that different sources seem to corroborate.

I do not pretend to bring forward a full survey of archaeological finds and research concerning drinking in the West Norse world. However, according to the nature of each chapter, I will utilize different kinds of archaeological evidence; whether it is archaeobotany, central-place digs, or drinking vessel finds. While this is primarily a text-based study, I believe that my thesis will make an important contribution to archaeology and help to further our understanding in the field of alcoholic culture in the West Norse world.

In structuring this thesis I will try to address, in order, the questions of what, where, when, how and why did people drink in Iceland and Norway during the period under discussion, though the main and overall question that will pervade my study is ‘what did it symbolically mean to consume alcohol?’ Chapter 2 will deal mainly with the different kinds of alcoholic beverages that were available to a thirteenth- or fourteenth-century Icelander or Norwegian. In this chapter I will try to answer the question of ‘what’ or ‘which’ drinks people knew, produced and consumed during that period as well as the ways of acquiring the raw materials to produce them. For this I

will mostly rely on historical, legal and archaeobotanical sources attesting to the acquisition, production and import of alcoholic beverages or the raw materials to produce them. I have several aims in this chapter. The first is to show that alcohol was a rather expensive and unusual commodity in the West Norse world, which contributed to its symbolic value. The second is to prove that not all kinds of alcohol were equally available or reputed at all times. The third is to prove that mead, one of the beverages most commonly associated with the ‘Vikings’ was actually not a common beverage but that it made its place in history due to the great symbolic value that its rarity bestowed upon it. In general, in this chapter the reader will become acquainted with the different sources and socioeconomic symbolism of the different kinds of alcoholic beverages available in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Iceland and Norway.

Chapter 3 will deal with the same issues as Chapter 2, but from a mythological point of view. Thus, this chapter will be devoted to the study of eddic literature as well as of the other main source for Old Norse myth, which is Snorri Sturluson’s *Ynglinga saga*. The main questions that I intend to answer in this chapter also concern the origins of alcohol as well as its symbolic nature. Thus, I will first focus on the myth about the ‘mead of poetry’. For this I will contrast, independently, the accounts given by the *Poetic Edda* and Snorri’s *Edda* about the acquisition of the ‘mead of poetry’. As we will see, contrary to the general approach to these sources as providing complementary information to the same myth, it seems that the two eddas provide different versions of different myths. But the academic trend to use Snorri’s *Edda* as a tool to decodify the *Poetic Edda* and vice versa, as we will see, has led to a confusion between myths about the origin and symbolism of mead. Second, in this chapter I will analyze the different mythic sources and settings of alcohol consumption; namely Ásgarðr and Jǫtunheim. Here, we will see that for the gods, just as for mankind, alcoholic beverages were a commodity that could not be easily acquired. In general, I hope to show that the

mythical sources seem to confirm that which we learned from the historical, legal and literary sources in the previous chapter.

Chapter 4 will deal mainly with 'where' did people drink. As we will see, the spatial location was mostly in drinking halls or in *skytningar* or taverns. In this chapter I will make use of legal sources regulating the sale of alcohol as well as historical sources attesting probable issues that arose from the import and sale of alcoholic beverages in developing towns. Due to the different ways in which urban life developed in Iceland and Norway, I will consider the two nations separately. In this chapter I will also deal with the symbolism attached to the different seating places that people could have had within the drinking space.

In Chapter 5 I will study the 'when' of drinking, that is, the main occasions in which people gathered to drink. As we will see, alcohol consumption or feasting were not quotidian activities. Alcoholic beverages were not always readily available, and on most occasions communal drinking was held only at major feasts such as funerals, weddings or seasonal feasts. In this chapter my sources will be mainly of a literary nature and I will try to disentangle the symbolic role that alcohol consumption had in those occasions.

Finally, Chapters 6 and 7 will both address similar topics but from a different point of view. The common theme of these chapters is the use of alcohol as an instrument of power. Alcohol consumption, and most of all, alcohol sharing has been in many societies a way of creating a community, of creating bonds and friendship.¹⁵ However, the high cost of alcohol in the West Norse world conferred on these beverages an additional value which, namely, made them also a symbol of wealth and power. Thus, these last chapters will be devoted to answer the question of 'how' alcohol was used in these societies; that is, the uses of alcohol as a symbol or as a tool for

¹⁵ See, for example Effros, pp. 1-25 and, Hugh Magennis, *Images of Community in Old English Poetry*, Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England, 18 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 35-60.

individuals to assert their position in society. Chapter 6 will deal mainly with the ways in which alcohol and the implements to serve it were used as a way to display and gain political and/or economical power. Here I will study the uses of alcoholic drinks as part of the Old Norse gift-giving culture, as a way to display power through drinking and boasting competitions and through the display of costly drinking vessels. Thus, my main sources for this chapter will be of a literary and archaeological nature. Finally, Chapter 7 will deal with a different way in which alcoholic drinks are related to power, that is, namely, as instruments of deception or as magic drinks that may help a person to take control over someone else's will. Due to the nature of this chapter, my main sources to answer these questions will be of a literary nature, mostly belonging to the *Fornaldar sqgur*.

As can be seen, my methodology and use of sources throughout this study will vary, depending on the questions that I intend to answer in each chapter. Sometimes I will rely more on historical, legal, literary or archaeological sources. But I will try to bring them all together in order to contrast the different kinds of evidence whenever I find pertinent connections. In my approach to all the different kind of sources I will always try to corroborate the evidence brought forwards by a particular kind of source by contrasting it with what we can gather from other sources.

CHAPTER 2: TYPES OF ALCOHOL

I will begin this study by analyzing the repertoire of drinks available to Icelanders and Norwegians during the Viking Age and the Middle Ages. Two texts provide us with what appears to be an exhaustive list of alcoholic beverages during these periods. During a wisdom contest in the Eddic poem *Alvíssmál*, probably composed in the early thirteenth century, Þórr asks a dwarf to tell him the names given to *ql* (ale?) in the different worlds:

Segðu mér þat, Alviss, -qll of rqc fira
voromc, dverg, at vitir-,
hvé þat ql heitir, er drecca alda synir
heimi hveriom í.

Ql heitir með mǫnnum, en með ásom bjórr,
kalla veig vanir,
hreinalqg iqtmar, en í helio miqð,
kalla sumbl Suttungs synir.¹⁶

(Tell me this, Alviss, all the great marvels of men/ I deem, dwarf, you know- / what is *ql* called, that which the sons of men drink / in each world?

It is called *ql* among men, and among the *Æsir bjórr*, / the Vanir call it *veig*, / *hreinalqg* the *Jqtmar*, and in Hell *mjqðr*, / the sons of Suttungr call it *sumbl*.)

This inventory seems to cover the names of most of alcoholic drinks we find in the Old Norse corpus; namely *ql*, *bjórr* and *mjqðr*.¹⁷ *Veig* and *hreinalqg* (or *hreinn-lqgr*) appear to be generic names for alcoholic beverages, as the first means “a kind of strong beverage, drink”¹⁸ while the second can be translated as “clear or pure liquid”¹⁹. However, it seems unreasonable to consider this list as a complete catalogue of alcoholic beverages or as a philological attempt to enumerate all the synonyms of *ql*. The poet’s knowledge of different varieties of drinks may have been greater, but his register of them was limited both by the metrics and the alliteration required in the

¹⁶ *Alv* 33-34.

¹⁷ As we will see later in this chapter, *ql* and *mjqðr* can be roughly translated as ‘ale’ and ‘mead’ while *bjórr* does not have a Modern English equivalent and should not be mistaken for ‘beer’.

¹⁸ “The noun *veig* appears only in poetry where it seems to refer to alcoholic drinks in general” (*IED*, *veig*) and “*i kenningar, for skjaldedrikk, skjaldskab*” (in *kenningar* for the poetic drink or poetry). (*LexPoet*, *veig*). In Eddic poetry it appears in *Grm* 25, *Bdr* 7, *Hdl* 50, *HHII* 46, *Akv* 35 and, *Alv* 34. Of these instances those of *Grm* 25 and *Bdr* 7 connect it with *mjqðr*; that of *Hdl* 50 connects it with *bjórr*; *Akv* 35 and, *Alv* 34 connect it with *ql* and; *HHII* 46 does not connect it with any drink in particular.

¹⁹ *IED*, *hreinn* and *lqgr*.

composition of this stanza. Furthermore, it would be naïve to attempt to equate all these beverages as different names for *q!* for the literary and historical sources seem to make it clear that these were all different. It seems more reasonable to believe that the poet was simply listing alcoholic products and perhaps, by attributing each one of them to a different realm he was indicating their availability (i.e. *q!* being the most common among men and *bjórr* being so rare that it belongs mainly to the *Æsir*) or a social connotation attached to each one of them. These possibilities will be discussed later.

The list of drinks in *Alvíssmál* seems to be completed by a riddle posed by Óðinn (appearing under the name Gestumblindi) in the thirteenth-century *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* during yet another wisdom contest. In it Óðinn asks:

*Hvat er þat drykki, er ek drakk í gær,
var-at þat vín né vatn né in heldr mungát
né matar ekki, ok gekk ek þorstalauss þaðan?
Heiðrekr konungr, hyggðu at gátu.²⁰*

(What is that drink that I drank yesterday/ it was not *vín* nor *vatn*, nor the best choice of *mungát* / nor any food, and I went without thirst after that? King Heiðrekr, do you think you know?)

In this case the repertoire is more limited, as all the possible answers but one are supposedly included in the riddle. Due to the way in which the question is posed, almost as a closed-question, *vín*, *vatn* and *mungát*²¹ seem to comprise the whole repertoire of drinks available, otherwise the riddle would not pose any difficulty. Just to complicate matters, Óðinn includes food in the question, just in case it could be implied that he quenched his thirst by ingesting a food with high water content. As we will see, this food-drink could refer to milk derivatives, such as *misa*, *skyr* or *sýra*, of which the last had a certain alcoholic content. The answer, provided by King Heiðrekr “*þar lagðist þú í forsælu, er dögg var fallin á grasi ok kældir svá varir þínar ok stöðvaðir svá þorsta þinn*”²² (you laid there in the shade, and dew had fallen on the grass and so you were refreshend and soothed your thirst) is somewhat

²⁰ *Heiðr X*, p. 38.

²¹ While *vín* and *vatn* can be translated as ‘wine’ and ‘water’, the noun *mungát* does not have an equivalent in Modern English. As we will see later in this chapter, *mungát* was some sort of strong *q!*.

²² *Heiðr X*, p. 39.

disconcerting, as it implies that water and dew were considered to be different kinds of liquid.

If my assumption is correct and *vín*, *vatn* and *mungát* somehow comprise a whole catalogue of beverages (except dew), it follows that at least one of these words encompasses a group or is a common denominator for beverages produced using the same or a similar technique. Nonetheless, we cannot discount the possibility that the poet who composed this stanza was, just like the *Alvíssmál* poet, stylistically limited in his choice of possible drinks.

Combining these two lists we get a catalogue of most of the names for alcoholic drinks used in extant sources. Yet, a very important drink is conspicuously absent; that is *sýra*, an alcoholic beverage produced by the fermentation of milk, which was one of the island's most common alcoholic drinks well into the nineteenth century. As mentioned earlier on, *sýra* may account for Óðinn's inclusion of food in his list of drinks for, as we will see in the section devoted to dairy products, it was used both as a drink and as foodstuff.

Unfortunately our sources do not describe the ways in which each drink was prepared and, with the sole exception of *vín*, there are no references to the ingredients involved in the concoction of alcoholic beverages. In this part of my analysis I will examine literary, historic and archaeological sources that may help us to elucidate the ingredients, preparation and, when possible, the costs involved in the preparation of the alcoholic drinks mentioned in the literary sources. In order to do so, I will follow these premises:

- (i). - The different alcoholic drinks mentioned in the sources may not have been equally available in different periods. This would affect their social status, as exotic drinks tend to be more appreciated than those which are consumed on a regular basis. For example, wine might have had a higher rank in the Viking

Age, when its availability was lower due to less trade, than during the Late Middle Ages, when the Hansa and the increased trade between Iceland/Norway and the continent made it more common, though not less luxurious.

(ii). - Norway and Iceland had different economies. Both countries had (and still have) rather limited agricultural areas; while Norway enjoys a larger arable area, agriculture in Iceland is mostly limited to grazing lands rather than to crop growing. My study will focus more on the agricultural situation in Iceland than in Norway, for most of our literary sources, and with them the evidence for the production and consumption of alcohol, come from this North Atlantic island.

(iii). - Between cultures and epochs there may not be accurate translations or equivalents for the drinks pertaining to each of them. There is literary and archaeological evidence to prove that different alcoholic beverages were being produced in Iceland and Norway. It is also difficult to resist the temptation to refer to cognates when it comes to understanding or re-contextualizing the meaning of each of the medieval beverages. But it is necessary to resist this temptation as this could lead us to fall into the trap of false cognates and attribute to these beverages characteristics of our contemporary repertoire of drinks. Accordingly, in this chapter I will resist translating the different terms for each alcoholic beverage from Old Norse into Modern English.

Fermentation is the process by which a certain type of fungus, called yeast, converts sugar into ethanol and carbon dioxide. In the Viking and Middle Ages Scandinavians had basically only four sources of sugar which could be transformed into alcoholic beverages. These are: sugar from milk, or lactose; sugar from cereals, or maltose, sugar from honey, or glucose; and sugar from fruits, or fructose.²³ There is

²³ Sucrose, or sugar obtained from sugar cane, was not known in Europe until the colonization of America in the sixteenth century.

another kind of beverage in which different sugar sources were mixed in order to obtain alcohol. In the following pages I will examine alcoholic production based on these four main groups, discussing the beverages of a mixed nature in a different section. Finally, I would like to note that spirits, obtained by alcoholic distillation instead of by alcoholic fermentation, were not produced nor consumed in Scandinavia until the end of the fifteenth century. Even though alcoholic distillation was described by Aristotle in the fourth century BC the technique was not used in Europe until the eleventh century and only by the fifteenth century could it be used to produce large amounts of spirits.²⁴ “Importen av brännvin till Norden tog fart i slutet av 1400-talet. En stor brännvinproducent på 1500-talet var Bordeaux och därifrån importerades via Tyskland”²⁵ (The importation of spirits to the North started at the end of the fifteenth century. A great spirit-producer during the sixteenth century was Bordeaux and it was imported from there, via Germany). Therefore, spirits escape the chronological range of this study.

2.1-LACTOSE-BASED DRINKS: *MISA*, *SKYR* AND *SÝRA*

In his 1960 article “The Function of Food in Medieval German Literature”, George Fenwick Jones studies the symbolic role of food and concludes that in Continental Germanic culture “milk and its products, particularly curds and buttermilk, were generally held in low esteem by the upper classes”.²⁶ This may be somehow expected in a society with access to extensive arable lands and a climate that favoured cereal and vine cultivation leading to the production of a fair amount of glucose, maltose and

²⁴ Claes Wahlöö, ‘Destillaternas Destillat: C₂H₅OH från Början til 1600-Talet’, in *Med en Gammeldansk Bland: Brännvin och Sill, en Nordisk Resa*, ed. by Agrelin, Ove and others (Malmö: Centraltryckeri, 2000), pp. 14-16.

²⁵ Wahlöö, p. 17.

²⁶ George Fenwick Jones, ‘The Function of Food in Mediaeval German Literature’, *Speculum*, 35 (1960) 78-86 (p. 82).

fructose-based alcoholic beverages. But in Iceland and Norway, where land suitable for agriculture was scarce, and glucose, maltose and lactose were difficult to obtain, the literary representation of lactose-based alcoholic drinks is strikingly similar to that of the continent.

In Norway, “geographical factors, such as considerable differences in elevation and the limited amount of arable land”²⁷ made it difficult for the peasantry to survive solely on crop-growing. Even though areas suitable for grain cultivation were scant, it was nevertheless undertaken on the east coast as far north as present day Tromsø (75°N);²⁸ but on the whole, hardly more than 3% of Norway’s land-mass has ever been under cultivation.²⁹ Iceland and Greenland endured even harsher agricultural conditions, as “grain could rarely be cultivated successfully in Iceland, and not at all in Greenland, where seeds did not ripen.”³⁰ This situation led both Icelanders and Norwegians to rely heavily on hunting, fishing and animal husbandry in order to secure their nourishment. A major difference between these countries is that the limited amount of arable land made Norway almost self-sufficient in its grain production, though still relying heavily on imports from time to time, while Iceland depended almost completely on the cereal imports.³¹ Grain production in both countries will be studied in detail, together with the production of maltose-based drinks, in the next section.

The almost complete lack of domestic grain production led these countries to develop a unique drinking culture based on the consumption of dairy products on an almost daily basis. Three main derivatives of milk appear in the sources, though not very often, and the archaeological traces left by their production are in some ways

²⁷ Eljas Orrman, ‘Rural Conditions’ in *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia: Prehistory to 1520*, ed. by Knut Helle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 250-311 (p. 262).

²⁸ Knut Helle and others, *Norway: A History from the Vikings to our own Times*, trans. by Michael Drake (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1998), p. 146.

²⁹ Orrman, p. 262.

³⁰ Orrman, p. 264.

³¹ Orrman, p. 270.

debatable. These dairy products are *misa*, *skyr* and *sýra*. *Misa*³² can be translated as whey, or more clearly “milk when the cheese has been taken from it”³³ or “*de vandagtige Dele af Melken som udskille sig fra Osten*”.³⁴ (the watery portion of milk that is separated from cheese). In general terms, *misa* is a by-product of the *skyr* elaboration. *Skyr* is a type of “curdled milk, curds, stored up for food”,³⁵ “sammenløben Melk.”³⁶ (curdled milk.) Cleasby, in the late nineteenth century, mentions that *skyr* “is quite a national dish of the Northmen and the Icelanders of the present day, as it was of the Teutons in more ancient times; for it doubtless was the *lac concretum* of Tacitus *Germania*”³⁷, who mentions that “their [i.e. the Germani] foodstuffs are simple: wild fruit, fresh game, or curdled milk, and they satisfy hunger without fancy dishes and seasonings.”³⁸ Finally, *sýra* is a certain variety of “sour whey, stored up and used for drink instead of small beer;”³⁹ or “*syre, koft sur Myse*”⁴⁰ (serum of milk, whey). These last two words survive in Modern Norwegian (Bokmål) as *myse* and *syre* respectively, the last one having changed its meaning to denote ‘acid’. Accordingly, as we shall see, the almost complete lack of reference to these milk-based drinks in the literary sources may be not only due to their low status but also to their extremely acidity.

Sýra is the milk product we will study more closely, as it appears to be the only one with any alcoholic content. However, as the production of *sýra* is so closely related to the making of *misa* and *skyr* we must pause to explain some technicalities. *Misa*, a by-product of *skyr*, is

made from skimmed milk and rennet [...] Until about the beginning of this century [i.e. the twentieth century] rennet was made mainly from a newborn calf’s stomach. The calf was slaughtered before it had any

³² Even though *AEW*, *OGNS* and *IED* spell it *mysa*, I decided to follow the spelling of this word as provided in *Íslenzk Fornrit* collection, where it appears as *misa*. *IEW* is the only dictionary that acknowledges both spellings.

³³ *IED*, *mysa*.

³⁴ *OGNS*, *mysa*.

³⁵ *IED*, *skyr*.

³⁶ *OGNS*, *skyr*.

³⁷ *IED*, *skyr*.

³⁸ Cornelius Tacitus, *Germania*, ed. and trans. by J. B. Rives (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), p. 86.

³⁹ *IED*, *sýra*.

⁴⁰ *OGNS*, *sýra*.

nourishment other than milk, the stomach was extracted and hung up to dry with the curdled milk still in it. When dry it was placed in a bowl of salt water or whey, and after one or two weeks the extract had become rennet.⁴¹

Once the rennet was ready, boiled skimmed milk was poured into a barrel and left to cool down to about 37°C; then the rennet was mixed with some warm milk and poured into the barrel while stirring and left to slowly cool down for a couple of hours.⁴² By then the milk had already curdled and the *skyr* was separated from the *misa*. Finally, the *misa* was poured into barrels for fermentation for as long as two years, and when it had become sour enough it was called *sýra*.⁴³

Sýra was the most common alcoholic drink in Iceland until fairly recently. It used to be diluted with water to soften the flavour, which might have been particularly strong as “it was common to mix eleven parts of water with one part of sour whey”.⁴⁴ Undiluted *sýra* was also stored and used to preserve food, as its acidity would inhibit bacterial growth. As mentioned before, there are only a few literary references to these products, and in general, whenever they are consumed, they do not seem to be highly appreciated. This is also noticeable in the few literary and historical references there are to them and the few compound words derived from them.

MISA

Misa can be translated as “*saure molken* [or] buttermilch”⁴⁵ (sour whey [or] buttermilk) or as “*molken*”⁴⁶ (whey) and it is the least frequently mentioned dairy

⁴¹ Hallgerður Gísladóttir, ‘The Use of Whey in Icelandic Households’, in *Milk and Milk Products from Medieval to Modern Times: Proceedings of the Ninth International Conference on Ethnological Food Research, Ireland, 1992*, ed. by Patricia Lysaght (Edinburgh: Canongate Academic, 1994), pp. 123-29 (p. 123).

⁴² Hallgerður Gísladóttir, p. 123.

⁴³ Hallgerður Gísladóttir, p. 124.

⁴⁴ Hallgerður Gísladóttir, p. 125.

⁴⁵ *AEW*, *misa*.

⁴⁶ *IEW*, *misa*. The *IEW* mentions *mysuotr* “käse aus eingekochten molken” (cheese made from whey) as a *misa* product (see *IEW*, *mysuotr*).

product discussed in this study. This term appears only twice in the written sources;⁴⁷ on both occasions as part of a riddle posed by Króka-Refr to king Haraldr. In this riddle Króka-Refr tells the king that he had a *saupsáttir*⁴⁸ (a whey-agreement) with one of his men. Soon after, the king remembers that “*Sá er drykkur á Íslandi, er misa heitir; er þat allt eitt: misa ok saup ok drykkur*”⁴⁹ (There is a drink in Iceland which is called *misa*; and they are all the same, *misa*, soup and drink.) and correctly guesses that by ‘*saupsáttir*’ Króka-Refr means a ‘*missáttir*’ (disagreement).⁵⁰ The fact that the king stresses that “there is a drink in Iceland called *misa*” makes it clear that *misa* may not have been known in Norway at the time. This perhaps emphasizes the fact that at least by the time the saga was written down during the fourteenth century, there was a substantial dietary difference between both countries, Icelanders relying more than Norwegians on animal husbandry and the intake of dairy products for their subsistence. The pejorative words *mqrlandi* (suet-land) and *mqrffandi*⁵¹ (enemy of suet), which Norwegians used to refer to Icelanders as a way of making fun of their supporting themselves chiefly from livestock, also bear witness to the different roles that animal husbandry (and with it dairy products) played in both countries.

SKYR

Skyr can be translated as “*sauere milch*”⁵² (sour milk) or as “*geronnene milch*”⁵³ (sour milk), and it appears 13 times in 8 different passages of the *Íslendinga sǫgur*⁵⁴ and

⁴⁷ It is not mentioned in *NGL*, *DN*, *DI*, or *Grg*. Among the literary sources it only appears in the *Íslendinga sǫgur*, where *OrðT* returns only two entries for the term, both in *Krók*. See *OrðT*, *mysa*.

⁴⁸ *Krók* XVI, p. 153.

⁴⁹ *Krók* XVII, p. 154.

⁵⁰ *IEW* explains the etymologies of this riddle as: “*saupáttir* ‘*uneinig*’ [wortspielend gebildet nach *mis-sáttir*, indem *mis-* ‘die negation’ scherzhaft auf *misa*, *mysa* ‘molken’ bezogen wird]” (*IEW*, *saupsáttir*) (*saupsáttir* ‘divided, disagreeing’ [pun made from *mis-sáttir* in which *mis-* ‘the negation’ is being related to *misa*, *mysa*, ‘whey’ as a joke). The relationship between *saup* and *mis* (the negation intended as *misa* or *mysa* as part of the riddle) is that *saup* means “*buttermilch*” or, more generally “*saup* bedeutet auch ‘was man schlürft, molken’” (*IEW*, *saup*) (“*buttermilk*” or more generally, “*saup* also means ‘that which is slurped, whey’”), turning *saup* into *mis*, the negative particle of ‘disagreement’.

⁵¹ *IED*, *mqrlandi* and *mqrffandi*.

⁵² *AEW*, *skyr*.

⁵³ *IEW*, *skyr*.

once in a passage of *Íslendinga saga*. On most of these occasions, it appears as a rather disgusting and low-prestige product. In *Bjarnar saga Hítðlakappa*, Björn is forced to ask for shelter while travelling in Iceland, and after being received with some discontent he is offered cheese and *skyr* for dinner. When these are served, he asks the farmer: “*Hvern veg kalla menn slíka vist í yðvarri sveit?*” *Hann svarar ok kvað menn kalla ost ok skyr. Björn mælti: ‘En vér kqllum slíka vist óvinafagnað.*”⁵⁵ (“How do men call such provisions in your district?” He answered and said men called them cheese and *skyr*. Björn said “In ours we call such provisions enemies’ joy.”) Accordingly, almost every time it appears in the *Íslendinga sǫgur*, it is offered as a sign of hostility or is consumed by the enemies of the saga’s hero.

Examples of *skyr* being offered as provisions to express the animosity between characters are to be found on several occasions. For instance, in *Egils saga* Egill sets out on a journey to collect some rents in Norway. During the trip his group of men is forced to ask for shelter among one of King Eiríkr blóðøx’s men. Egill’s group is welcomed and offered bread, butter and “*skyraskar stórir*”⁵⁶ (large *skyr*-vessels), as the host claims that “*Harmr er þat nú mikill, er ql er ekki inni, þat er ek mega yðr fagna sem ek vilda*”⁵⁷ (It is a great shame that there is no *ql* in the house, so that I could have welcomed you as I would have liked) and insists that “*‘Fúss mynda ek’, kvað Bárðr, ‘at gefa yðr betra drykk, ef til væri.*”⁵⁸ (‘I would be glad’ said Bárðr, ‘to give you a better drink if I had some.’) The host’s opinions on the quality of the beverage he is offering help us to understand that *skyr* was not a highly esteemed drink, and he is almost ashamed of only having that to offer. However at the same time as the host claims to have nothing better to offer he is offering a feast next-door in honour of king Eiríkr blóðøx. As is to be

⁵⁴ *BjH* XXVII, *Ljósv* X (XX), *Korm* XVI, *Fbr* XXIV, *GrXXVIII*, *Eb* XLV and, *Eg* XLIV and LVII. Three instances are repeated in the different versions of *Ljósv*, making a total of 16. (See *OrðT*, *skyr*)

⁵⁵ *BjH* XXVII, p. 185.

⁵⁶ *Eg* XLIII, p. 107.

⁵⁷ *Eg* XLIII, p. 107.

⁵⁸ *Eg* XLIII, p. 107.

expected, large amounts of *q!* are being drunk at this feast.⁵⁹ The deception enrages Egill so much that he later ends up killing the farmer, this being the first of many events that lead to his enmity with the king. Egill's displeasure may have been due not only to the fact that he was offered a rather bad tasting drink, but also to the fact that by offering him *skyr* instead of a better beverage the host was treating him as being of a lower rank; the host was making clear that he held Egill as a low-caste person. In another episode, Egill arrives in similar circumstances at the farm of one of the king's enemies, whom he is supposed to tax. This time the farmer offers "*stórir askar, fullir af skyrri*"⁶⁰ (large vessels full of *skyr*) alleging that is all he has to offer. Once more, Egill finds out that there is something better to drink in the house (*mungrát* in this case) and, once drunk, Egill ends up mutilating and nearly killing the farmer after vomiting the *skyr* all over him. The cause of Egill's rage may be the same as that in the previous example: the man should have welcomed him with the dignity that a king's envoy deserves, and by offering him *skyr* the farmer implies that neither Egill nor the king, whom he represents, are highly high esteemed by the farmer. This lack of respect for the royal authority may be represented in the quality of the beverage that they are offered.

Similarly, in *Kormaks saga*, *skyr* is used to describe the meanness of a character. In this saga Bersi is described as a mean and dishonourable character whose buttocks had been sliced off during a duel.⁶¹ One time, when Bersi's men go to see him, they all sit to eat and the saga reports that "*hann sat einn saman, ok kom fyrr matr hans en annarra manna. Bersi hafði graut, en aðrir menn ost ok skyr.*"⁶² (He sat alone, and his food was served before other men's. Bersi had porridge and the others had cheese and *skyr*.) Saga literature makes it clear that sharing a table and being generous in distributing food and drink (and other forms of wealth) with one's men were considered

⁵⁹ *Eg* XLIV, pp. 107-08.

⁶⁰ *Eg* LXXI, p. 224.

⁶¹ *Korm* XII, p. 250. Having one's buttocks sliced in a duel or in battle was a sign of cowardice, as they can only be thrust when giving one's back to the attacker, i.e. while fleeing.

⁶² *Korm* XVI, p. 260.

to be some of the assets of a great leader, while meagreness and lack of generosity were the assets of a villain.⁶³ Thus, the portrayal of Bersi sitting on his own and eating porridge (which was very expensive in Iceland at the time) while his men only have *skyr* emphasizes the saga's depiction of Bersi as a dishonourable man.

It also seems that in the literary sources *skyr* was not only presented as being offered to others by their enemies; it was also depicted as a dish consumed by worthless men. In *Ljósvetninga saga* it is mentioned only in relation to one character, Rindill, whose first description in the saga is to be found in a dialogue between two men who have just spotted him in a booth, and on spotting him say: “*Hefir þú nqkkurn þann sét, at síðr sé nqkkurs verðr en þessi maðr?*”⁶⁴ (Have you ever seen a man more worthless than this?) Later on Rindill sets out to kill a man, and before ambushing him, he stops to eat: “*Rindill hafði skyr ok mataðisk skjótt, því at skyrit var þunnt.*”⁶⁵ (Rindill had *skyr* and ate fast because the *skyr* was thin.) Rindill is killed by Eilifr during the ambush and the saga reports that “*setti þegar kesjuna á Rindil miðjan, en skyrit spræandi ór honum ok upp á Eilíf.*”⁶⁶ (he thrust the halberd at once through Rindill's stomach, and the *skyr* spurted out of him and all over Eilifr.)

The only other scene in which the *Íslendinga sǫgur* relate *skyr* with an enemy occurs in *Grettis saga*. Grettir, as an adult, decides to take revenge for some insults he suffered from Auðunn during his childhood. But, when he arrives at Auðunn's house, he is told that Auðunn has gone to the shed to fetch some food. After a while he arrives with the food, which consists of *skyr*. When the fight begins Auðunn throws a bag full of *skyr* to Grettir, with the result that “*Grettir varð allr skyrugr; þótti honum þat meiri smán en þó at Auðunn hefði veitt honum mikinn áverka.*”⁶⁷ (Grettir was all covered with *skyr*; which seemed to him a greater disgrace than if Auðunn had given him a great

⁶³ Gift-giving in connection with alcoholic beverages and feasts will be discussed in Chapter 6.

⁶⁴ *Ljósv* VII (XVIII), p. 44.

⁶⁵ *Ljósv* X (XX), p. 55.

⁶⁶ *Ljósv* X (XX), p. 55.

⁶⁷ *Gr* XXVIII, p. 96.

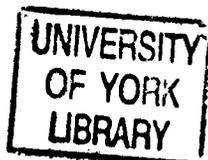
wound.) Why was being covered with *skyr* a greater shame or disgrace than being wounded? *Skyr* seems to be used not only to tell something about the character of those who consume or offer it, but is also used in scenes to convey the sense of disgust. In *Egils saga* one person vomits it all over another and in *Ljósvetninga saga* a person is covered by *skyr* that spurted from someone's wound. The disgust seems to come from the flavour, and perhaps smell, which explains why in *Ljósvetninga saga* it is clarified that Rindill could eat it fast because it was *þunnr* (thin or diluted). In *Egils saga* it is said that they drank it because "*þeir Egill vǫru mjǫk þyrstir af mæði; tóku þeir upp askana ok drukku ákaft skyrir*"⁶⁸ (Egill's company was extremely thirsty from exhaustion; they took the vessels and gulped the *skyr*) and on the other occasion Egill and his men are offered *skyr* the description is basically the same "*Þeir Ólvir vǫru þyrstir mjǫk ok supu skyrir*."⁶⁹ (Ólvis's men were very thirsty and gulped the *skyr*.) In both circumstances the fact that the party was very thirsty is stressed, perhaps implying that they had no choice but to drink it. This may also explain why it was so insulting for Grettir to be bathed in *skyr*, for its literary use seems to convey a feeling of disgust and shame and thus Grettir was not only covered in *skyr* but was also soaked in all its symbolical meanings. As we have seen, in literature *skyr* seems to have had quite a bad reputation even if in everyday life it was a common product.

'Real-life' *skyr* seems to be represented in two sagas. In *Eyrbyggja saga*, Snorri the goði, one of the wisest and most powerful and honourable chieftains portrayed in the *Íslendinga sǫgur*, helps his namesake Snorri Þorbrandsson who is wounded after a battle. While attending to his wounds, Snorri the goði offers him something to eat and drink -cheese and *skyr*.⁷⁰ There is nothing dishonourable portrayed in this scene, and as a matter of fact Snorri the goði seems to act in the best interests of his namesake. There is reason to believe that in this scene the dairy products are represented as they might

⁶⁸ *Eg* LXXI, p. 224.

⁶⁹ *Eg* XLIII, p. 107.

⁷⁰ *Eb* XLV, p. 130.



have been used in everyday life. So, Snorri, a rich and powerful chieftain, offers *skyr* not as a sign of animosity, but just as the ordinary food it was, dispossessed of all literary conventions. As we shall see later in this chapter, not even chieftains could afford to consume *ql*, *mungát*, *mjqðr*, *vín* or *bjórr* on a daily basis. Snorri then offered what might have been the most common thing to offer: cheese and *skyr*.

The second and last scene depicting ‘real-life’ *skyr* occurs in *Fóstbræðra saga* after a battle in Norway, in which one of the two main characters of the saga Þormóðr Bersason is wounded and about to die. After the battle a woman gives milk to the wounded, and when she comes to Þormóðr “*Konan mælti: ‘Þú munt vera sárr mjqk, eða villtu drekka mjólk? Þat er sárum mqnnum gott til styrkðar.’ Þormóðr svarar: ‘Eigi þarf ek mjólk at drekka, því at ek em nú svá fullr sem ek hafa nýsopit skyr út á Íslandi.’*”⁷¹ (The woman said: ‘You must be greatly wounded, so do you want to drink some milk? It is good to give some strength to the wounded.’ Þormóðr answers: ‘I do not need to drink milk, because I am now as full as if I had just had a mouthful of Icelandic *skyr*.’) Once more, there seems to be nothing dishonourable in this scene as Þormóðr dies in a very respectable way: composing poetry after falling in battle to defend the king he has sworn allegiance to. He refuses the milk not because it is dishonourable, but because he feels as full as if he had eaten *skyr*. This seems to be, then, another representation of *skyr* and milk as they were used in real life, and the fact that he refers to *skyr* as ‘Icelandic *skyr*’ may attest to the fact that it was not produced in Norway, where this scene takes place. *Skyr* was sometimes carried as provisions, and the bags in which it was transported were “*húðum ok bundit fyrir ofan; þat kqlluðu menn skyrkylla.*”⁷² (hides and [were] tied from above; men called these *skyr* bags.)

That milk is mentioned as a food drunk after battle or offered to the wounded might mislead us into thinking that it might have been considered to have healing

⁷¹ *Fbr* XXIV, p. 274.

⁷² *Gr* XXVIII, p. 96.

effects.⁷³ However it might have been taken after battle just as it might have been ingested during any other occasion. The fact that the same woman who brings milk to Þormóður later comes with some herbs to cure him seems to support the idea that milk was not considered to have healing effects, at least not such as those of the “*lauk ok qnnur grqs*”⁷⁴ (leek and other herbs) that she brings him. Perhaps milk and its products were offered to the ill or wounded due to their high protein content, which would be a great aid for a rapid healing.

SÝRA

Sýra can be defined as “*das sauer gewordene milchwasser*”⁷⁵ (milkwater turned sour) or as “*saure milch*”⁷⁶ (sour milk) and is related to the adjective *súrr*, meaning “*sauer, unangenehm*”⁷⁷ (sour, unpleasant). This product is mentioned in only three episodes of the *Islendinga sqgur*⁷⁸ and in two of the *Sturlunga saga* compilation.⁷⁹ This dairy product was drunk instead of beer,⁸⁰ so that the terminology used for beer-brewing ended up being used also for its production.⁸¹ However, *sýra* is never said to be drunk in the sagas; instead, it is often used for a more noble purpose such as extinguishing fires.

Perhaps the most famous episode involving *sýra* is that in *Gísla saga*, where Þorbjörn Þorkellsson, the father of Gísli, is nicknamed ‘*súrr*’ after using *sýra* to escape from a fire.⁸² This happens when they are being burnt inside an outbuilding. In the shorter version of the saga, it is said that they found “*sýruker tvau í því húsi*”⁸³ (they found two barrels of *sýra* in the house) and then they soaked two *hafstqkkur* (goat-

⁷³ Magic and healing beverages will be discussed in Chapter 7.

⁷⁴ *Fbr* XXIV, p. 274. For magic drinks and the medicinal uses of leek see Chapter 7.

⁷⁵ *IEW*, *sýra*.

⁷⁶ *AEW*, *sýra*.

⁷⁷ *IEW*, *süro-s*.

⁷⁸ See *OrðT*, *sýra*.

⁷⁹ See the index to the *Sturlunga saga* compilation.

⁸⁰ See *IED*, *sýra* and; Hallgerður Gísladóttir, p. 124.

⁸¹ Hallgerður Gísladóttir, Use of Whey, p. 125.

⁸² *Gísl* III-IV, pp. 12-15.

⁸³ *Gís* III, p. 12.

skins) in *sýra* in order to fight the fire. In the longer version, the facts are rendered in a similar way: “*sýruker var inni í búrinu eða stökkaker. Þeir taka sýruna ok bera í eldinn ok slökkva.*”⁸⁴ (*sýra*-barrels or stock-barrels were in the room. They took the *sýra* and carried it to the fire and extinguished it.) This last passage is significant as it makes a distinction between a *sýruker* and a *stökkaker*. As the end result is that they obtain *sýra* from the barrels, it highlights that there was a difference between the *sýra* that was used for drinking and the one used for preserving food. A *sýruker*, or *sýra*-barrel, seems to have been used mainly for storing *sýra*. On the other hand, a *stökkaker*, or stock-barrel, contained food pickled in *sýra*, as the acidity of the liquid helped to stop food-decomposition. The Old Norse term *súrša*, “*in molken einlegen*”⁸⁵ (to pickle in whey), describes this food-preserving practice.

During the burning of Njáll *sýra* is put to similar use: when the burners set the house on fire for the first time “*Þá báru konur sýru í eldinn ok slöktu fyrir þeim.*”⁸⁶ (Then the women carried *sýra* to the fire and extinguished it.) The only other time *sýra* is mentioned in the *Íslendinga sǫgur* is when a valuable shield is destroyed after being stripped of its gold and thrown into a *sýruker*⁸⁷ (barrel of *sýra*) as an act of contempt against the giver. *Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*, part of the *Sturlunga saga* compilation, records a similar use, when a house is being burned “*þeir, er inni váru, báru vatn ok sýru í eldinn ok slöktu sem þeir máttu.*”⁸⁸ (the ones who were inside carried water and *sýra* to the fire and put it out the best they could.)

In the three burning scenes, *sýra* is said to be carried to the fire and on one occasion it is said that “*nú taka þeir Gíslí hafstǫkkur tvær ok drepa þeim í sýrukerin ok verjask svá eldinum*”⁸⁹ (now they took two goat-skins and immersed in the *sýra*-barrel

⁸⁴ *Gísl* IX, p. 30.

⁸⁵ *IEW, súrša*.

⁸⁶ *Nj* CXXIX, p. 328.

⁸⁷ *Eg* LXXVIII, p. 273.

⁸⁸ *Hrafn* XV, p. 219.

⁸⁹ *Gísl* III, p. 12-13.

and defended themselves from the fire like that.). As far as I am aware goat-skins do not absorb a great amount of liquids so, the correct interpretation of the passage may be that the goat-skins that they were used as fire-blankets to extinguish the fire or that were used as bags to carry the *sýra* to the fire. The same can be inferred from the other two passages, in which people are said to find the *sýruker* but carry the *sýra* to the fire. This can be due to both to the great size of the *ker* (barrels) in which it was stored (up to 1.5 meters in diameter) as well as to the fact that, for insulation purposes, they were partially dug into the earth.⁹⁰

Vessels for Storing *Skyr* and *Sýra*

There are few occasions on which the written sources mention the vessels in which dairy products were stored. These vessels might have left some archaeological traces, yet this evidence is not free of controversy. One example comes from Stöng, a farm in the south of Iceland (see figure 4.4) destroyed by an eruption of mount Heckla in 1104.⁹¹ One of the rooms in this farm “contained the traces of three barrels set into the floor. A white deposit in the base of one of these has been interpreted as the remains of *skyr*.”⁹² Traces of barrels have also been found in the Greenlandic settlements from Vatnahverfi and Nipaitsoq, and thus the rooms in which they were found are regarded as storerooms.⁹³ However, Buckland and Perry have found new ways of interpreting such findings. Based on the large amount of ectoparasites (mainly *melophagus ovinus* and *dalmalinia ovis*) beneath one of the rooms in the Icelandic farm of Stóraborg, in use

⁹⁰ Hallgerður Gísladóttir, p. 126.

⁹¹ P.C. Buckland, and D.W.Perry, ‘Ectoparasites of Sheep from Stóraborg, Iceland and their Interpretation: Piss, Parasites and People, a Palaeoecological Perspective’, *Hikuin*, 15 (1989), 37-46 (p. 43).

⁹² Buckland and Perry, p. 43.

⁹³ Buckland and Perry, p. 43.

since the Middle Ages but abandoned in 1834,⁹⁴ the authors propose a different approach to the use of these barrels as urine containers. They argue that

Soap did not become widely available in any quantity until the latter half of the nineteenth century and its role was taken both traditionally and commercially by a readily available strong alkali –fermented urine. The collection and uses of human urine, from personal washing and medicine to large scale employment in wool scouring, in Britain have been recently discussed by Stead. Its use for similar purposes on farms in Iceland is alluded to by Jónasson in his general discussion of the insanitary [sic] nature of nineteenth century farm interiors.⁹⁵

Thus, the use of fermented urine to wash wool would explain the large number of parasites associated with sheep in a single room. Buckland and Perry extend their interpretation to the white residues of the barrel at Stöng. As

Stöng is a fairly dry site and, as a recent sampling programme has shown, the sediments are inimical to the good preservation of organic materials; after nearly nine hundred years, a milk product would be unlikely to leave a ‘white’ residue. The salts precipitated from large scale urine storage, however, could survive and also indurate the sodden timbers of the base of a barrel sufficiently to allow the partial preservation.⁹⁶

Collection of excrement is usually mentioned in the literary sources, for it was used as a fertilizer. However, the collection of urine is mentioned only once, as a substitute drink for a group of sailors stranded at sea.⁹⁷ All in all, the purpose of these barrels is uncertain; as Buckland and Perry discuss, it seems more probable that they were used to store urine instead of dairy products. If their argument is correct, then one would not expect to find archaeological traces of the storage of milk products. However, there is also historical evidence to the storage of dairy products and the size of the containers.

Evidence for the existence of special rooms to store these large barrels and their *sýra* and *skyr* contents comes from *Íslendinga saga*. When Earl Gizurr Þorvaldsson is attacked in his farm he hides in the “*skyrbúr*”⁹⁸ (*skyr*-room) where he sees that a “*skyrker stoð á stokkum*”.⁹⁹ (*skyr* barrel was standing on some logs.) Then he dips his

⁹⁴ Buckland and Perry, p. 39.

⁹⁵ Buckland and Perry, p. 42.

⁹⁶ Buckland and Perry, p. 44.

⁹⁷ *Flóam* XXIV.

⁹⁸ *Ísl* CLXXIV, p. 492.

⁹⁹ *Ísl* CLXXIV, p. 492.

sword into it and sees that the foam reaches the hilt of the sword. He then notices that “þar var ker í jörðu hjá lítit, ok var sýra, en skyrkerit stóð þar yfir ofan ok hulði mjök sýrukerit, þat er í jqrðunni var.”¹⁰⁰ (nearby there was a barrel in the earth, and it was sýra, but the skyr-barrel stood above it and mostly hid the sýra-barrel that was in the earth.) Seeing that the barrel was big enough to hide a man, he climbs into the sýra and when the men come in looking for him they thrust spears into the barrel, but are not able to find him, and Gizurr receives only small scratches from the spears. He later he states that “kalt var í sýrunni.”¹⁰¹ (it was cold in the sýra.)

This episode shows several things. First, that there was a room reserved specially for the storage of skyr and sýra barrels. Second, also corroborating our archaeological evidence, it shows that these barrels were dug into the earth for insulation purposes. Thirdly, it illustrates how some of these barrels were big enough to hide a man and for that man to survive an attack inside them. Finally, it shows that sýra was used to preserve food products, as when the attackers hit Gizurr inside the barrel they comment that there is something in there but make no further investigations, as they might have thought that they had hit some food that was being stored in the barrel.

Now, for a liquid to ferment it needs to be at room temperature, otherwise the yeast would not be able to transform the sugar into alcohol. Accordingly, the skyr barrel which is standing on its supports is at room temperature and is said to be foaming, which is a sign of fermentation. Meanwhile, the sýra barrel is dug into the earth and cold, most probably as a way of stopping the fermentation process. Thus, I would suggest that the barrels found dug into the earth were used to preserve liquids that were already fermented, be it urine or beverages. Meanwhile, the barrels standing free in the room (at room-temperature) were used for fermenting liquids.

¹⁰⁰ Ísl CLXXIV, p. 492.

¹⁰¹ Ísl CLXXIV, p. 492.

Finally, the size of these *ker* is alluded to in the law collection, *Grágás*, in the section containing regulations about moving farms. The law states for a man moving out of a farm that:

Ef hann á ker inni þar skal hann út hafa fært það, og svo annað gagn sitt, þvottdag hið síðasta í fardögum, nema hinn lofi honum lengur að hafa þar. Því aðeins skal hann hús brjóta til þess að færa ker sitt út, ef hann bætir aftur jafnvel sem aður var, en ellegar á hann í stöfum út að færa.¹⁰²

(If he has barrels inside the house he has to take them out as well as his other domestic utensils, by the latest washing-day of the 'moving days' unless is given the permit to have them there for longer. Soon afterwards he shall break the house in order to take his barrels [out], if he breaks it afterwards he shall leave it as it was before, otherwise he shall take them out in staves.)

So, the size of the barrels might have been so great as to make the task of taking them out almost an ordeal, either needing to break a hole in the wall in order to move them out or needing to disassemble them.

As we have seen, dairy products do not seem to have enjoyed an outstanding reputation in the literary sources, even if - and most probably due to the fact that - they were an everyday product. This may be due to the fact that drinks in literature, and food in general, were not valued according to their dietary value, but according to their symbolic status. Thus, dairy products, as an everyday meal and drink occupied the lowest position in the status pyramid while they had the highest rank in availability. In other words, the social status and availability of food and drink were inversely proportional. Taking that into consideration it comes as no surprise that *misa*, *skyr*, *sýra* or even milk are never mentioned in the *Fornaldar sǫgur*, as they did not agree with the legendary and heroic past portrayed in this group of sagas. The great heroes of the past would never be depicted drinking milk-products. Another possible explanation for the absence of these drinks in the *Fornaldar sǫgur* is that they were produced only in Iceland and therefore not associated with continental heroes.

¹⁰² *Grág*, p. 346.

When it comes to archaeological evidence, these drinks are hard to trace, as their production would not have left any residue, apart from their containers, and even the interpretation of these is subject to debate. The size of the few barrels that have been found, in case they were indeed used for storing dairy products, agrees with the size of the barrels described in the literary sources, and point to large scale production of these drinks, be it as a beverage or intended to preserve food.

2.2-MALTOSE-BASED DRINKS: *QL* AND *MUNGÁT*

Cereal-based drinks are produced by the infusion of malted meal (preferably from wheat or barley¹⁰³) in hot water in order to break the enzymes in the cereal's starch, resulting in the production of enough sugar to allow fermentation. Thus, one could say that the brewing process actually starts with the cultivation of the cereals to be used. This forces us to revisit the agricultural history of Norway and Iceland as the amount of grain locally produced would directly affect the price and availability of these kinds of beverages.

Brewing, which is believed to have been 'discovered' some 6000 years BC in Ancient Egypt, is a relatively easy process. Yet, the production of beverages produced exclusively from cereals seems to have arrived relatively late to Northern Europe. Based on archaeological evidence from Bronze and Iron Age burials in Northern Europe, Ian S. Hornsey argues that "at least some of the early alcoholic beverages were of a 'mixed nature'; all kinds of sugar sources being pressed into service. It may not have been until the 1st millennium BC that 'pure' drinks, such as mead and ale, began to appear."¹⁰⁴ These mixed beverages, namely *bjórr*, will be discussed in the last section of this chapter.

¹⁰³ The chemical composition of these two cereals makes them the most suitable for brewing. See Hornsey, p. 171.

¹⁰⁴ Hornsey, pp. 219-20.

QL AND MUNGÁT

The brewing process of *ql* and *mungát* begins with the collection and storage of grain. In Scandinavia, barley was the most widely produced cereal, as it is one of the few grasses that are able to endure the harsh climate of the region. It “was mown with a sickle and then bound in trusses and stacked in ricks.”¹⁰⁵ In order to allow alcoholic production the grains must be allowed to germinate, which is usually done by soaking the grain in water for a couple of days and keeping them moist for about a week. This allows the shoots to produce starch, which is one of the main elements in the fermentation process, as starch is the main source of maltose. “For brewing purposes, seed germination is terminated, at the appropriate stages, by carefully applied heat. This controlled germination of cereal seeds is known as malting.”¹⁰⁶ The malted seeds are then ground and the meal can then be used for both bread and brewing. The malted meal is then infused in hot water at a controlled temperature between 50-65° C in order to break down the starch into maltose, which will be transformed into alcohol later on. This process is known as mashing, and its product is known as mash. The mash is then stored in vessels where it is allowed to ferment. Fermentation is produced by

a unicellular fungus, the yeast, a member of the *genus Saccharomyces*, [that] convert sugars such as glucose, fructose and maltose, into ethyl alcohol (ethanol) and carbon dioxide (CO₂), in the absence of oxygen [...] a process referred to as alcoholic fermentation.¹⁰⁷

The mash could either be attacked by wild yeasts just by letting it rest outdoors to cool down, or its fermentation could be induced by the ‘controlled’ introduction of yeasts, most likely from saliva.¹⁰⁸ It is not unlikely that honey would be added to the mash in order to increase the sugar content and so raise the alcoholic volume of the beverage. After a week of fermentation, the result would be ale with a maximum of 15% of alcohol. It is very likely that both the mashing and the fermentation took place in the

¹⁰⁵ Jón Jóhannesson, *A History of the Old Icelandic Commonwealth: Islendinga saga*, trans. by Haraldur Bessason (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1974), p. 297.

¹⁰⁶ Hornsey, p. 13.

¹⁰⁷ Hornsey, p. 11.

¹⁰⁸ The use of salive as a yeast source will be discussed in the Chapter 3.

same vessel. As barley is not so suitable for bread-making as wheat is, it is generally believed that barley was mainly grown for brewing purposes, while wheat was grown mainly for baking.¹⁰⁹

Consulting the English translations of the sagas and Eddas, one can easily verify that the Old Norse words '*ql*', '*mungát*' and '*bjórr*' are normally translated as 'ale', 'strong ale' and 'beer' respectively. To the modern reader, used to the differentiation between 'ale' and 'beer' (even though only a few can actually pinpoint the exact difference between them), it may seem reasonable to assume that in the Viking Age and Scandinavian Middle Ages people also had access to these same kind of beverages. However, there does not seem to be any evidence to prove that '*bjórr*' equates with what we know nowadays as 'beer'. Beer is actually the hopped version of ale, a technique greatly used by the Hanseatic merchants, who added this plant to ale not only for flavour purposes but mainly because it improves the keeping qualities of ale, making it suitable for storage and export.¹¹⁰ Maltose-based fermented drinks, both hopped and unhopped, seem to have been known in Old Norse as *ql* and *mungát*, while the adoption of the word '*bjórr*' to name them seems to have been acquired due to the trade with the Hanseatic merchants. Yet '*bjórr*' was a genuine Old Norse word in use long before the Hanseatic period, most probably designating a drink of a different nature, which will be discussed in the section devoted to drinks of a mixed nature.

The Old Norse word for *ql* survives in all Scandinavian languages, denoting what we know nowadays as ale and beer. The word *ql* survives as *öl* in Modern Icelandic and Swedish and; as *øl* in Faroese, Norwegian and Danish, all of them related to the Gothic *alu* or *alub*.¹¹¹ According to Räsänen the Akkadian word '*uluš*' or '*ulut*', used to denote a beer of uncertain nature, might have been the origin of this word and

¹⁰⁹ Hornsey, p. 170.

¹¹⁰ H.E. Kylstra, 'Ale and Beer in Germanic' in *Iceland and the Medieval World: Studies in Honour of Ian Maxwell*, ed. by Gabriel Turville-Petre and others (Victoria: Wilke and Company Limited, Organizing Committee for Publishing a Volume in Honour of Professor Maxwell, 1974), pp. 7-16 (p. 12).

¹¹¹ See *IEW*, *ql* and *AEW*, *ql*.

its other cognates.¹¹² Both the *AEW* and *IEW* translate *ql* as ‘*bier*’¹¹³ (beer). Literary and legal evidence contains the word *ql* many times, and even if we know that the word in modern Scandinavian languages refers both to beer and ale, we still have to gather evidence that the Old Norse word referred to malt-based beverages. In the sagas, as we will see in this section, there are several occurrences in which it is reported that merchants arrived with a cereal cargo and that *ql* was drunk soon after or that some members of a household were engaged in *ql*-brewing. Even if these occurrences point vaguely to *ql* as a cereal product, they are not definitive evidence. In the written sources, I can only find a single occurrence in which malt is directly associated with *ql*-brewing. This passage comes from *Víga-Glúms saga*, written in the early thirteenth century. In it Arnórr Steinólfsson goes to a nearby lodge where he has some malt stored. He undertakes the journey soon after he gets engaged and the malt seems to form part of the preparations for his wedding feast. On his way back he is ambushed and the pack horses carrying the malt are stolen. The attackers then comment “*Eigi berum vér til alls ógíptu; qlit skulum vér drekka, en þeir munu ráða kosti konunnar*”¹¹⁴ (We are not completely out of luck; we shall drink *ql*, even if they set the price for the woman. [i.e. get married]) Regardless of the kind of malt that was robbed on this occasion, from this passage we get to know that at least during the thirteenth century, when the saga was written down, *ql* was produced out of malted cereals, for it was only malt (together with the horses) that was stolen and we can expect that the contemporary audience linked the malt with the beverage that the robbers expected to drink.

The literary corpus also attests to the existence of a similar beverage, called *mungát*, a word that appears to refer to a stronger kind of *ql*. *AEW* translates it as

¹¹² Cited in Bill Griffiths, ‘The Old English Alcoholic Vocabulary: a Re-Examination’, *Durham University Journal*, 78 (1986) 231-250 (p. 231).

¹¹³ See *IEW*, *ql* and *AEW*, *ql*.

¹¹⁴ *Glúm XI*, p. 39.

‘geringere sorte bier’¹¹⁵ (a low-class kind of beer) while *IEW* states that it is “eine art bier” (a type of beer).¹¹⁶ The word survives in Modern Icelandic as *mungát* and in Norwegian and Swedish dialects as *mungaát*, and in Danish as *mundgodt*.¹¹⁷ Etymologically, the word can have various meanings. It can come “aus ‘munr’ und ‘gát’, also eig. ‘geliebter trunk’”¹¹⁸ (from *munr* and *gát* meaning actually ‘beloved drink’). *IEW* proposes a different etymology for the word as it associates it with “gát.-leckerei”¹¹⁹ (*gát*.- something tasty) which would render *mungát* as ‘tasty drink’.¹²⁰ In general, the sources seem to point to the fact that *mungát* was indeed a strong kind of *ql*. For example, in *Egils saga* we read that “því næst var *ql* inn borit, ok var þat it sterkasta *mungát*”¹²¹ (afterwards the *ql* was carried in, and it was the strongest *mungát*) and “þá lét Hqgni bera inn skaptiker ok *mungát*; Hildiríðr bóndadóttir bar *ql* gestum.”¹²² (then Hqgni came in with vats and *mungát*; Hildiríðr, the farmer’s daughter, served *ql* to the guests.) Unlike poetry, in prose the authors are not limited in their use of vocabulary by metrical rules. Thus, the fact that the author equates *mungát* with strong *ql* may well be due to the fact that that is exactly what *mungát* was. One can not discard the possibility of *mungát* being a brew fortified with other types of sugar, making it an alcoholic beverage of mixed nature. This would explain its etymologies as ‘tasty drink’, probably related to the sweet flavour conferred to the drink by the extra sugar. Both *OGNS* and *IEW* define *mungát* as a strong kind of *ql*, most probably based on the passage quoted above.. But what evidence do we have to prove these definitions right? The definitions seem to be based in the above mentioned passage, in which the *ql* brought in is said to have been the strongest kind of *mungát*, which seem to point only to the fact that *ql* and *mungát* were similar – yet not identical - products. The word does

¹¹⁵ *AEW*, *mungát*.

¹¹⁶ *IEW*, *mungát*.

¹¹⁷ See *AEW*, *mungát* and *IEW*, *mungát*.

¹¹⁸ *AEW*, *mungát*.

¹¹⁹ *IEW*, *gát* and *mungát*.

¹²⁰ See, for example *IEW*, *sælgæti*, meaning “leckerbissen” (something tasty).

¹²¹ *Eg* LXXI, p. 225.

¹²² *Eg* VII, pp. 16-17.

not occur in the context of the Eddas, but does appear several occasions in the sagas and laws, though it is not recorder in the *Diplomatarium Islandicum*. However, the previous quotes are the only ones that bear any evidence to the fact that *mungát* was indeed a strong king of *ql*.

CEREAL PRODUCTION AND BREWING

Over the last centuries, the climatic and topographic conditions have led to the disappearance of cereal cultivation in Iceland. When Iceland was first settled c. 870 AD some grain farming took place. Soon after the settlement there was a vast deforestation in the island which becomes evident by the decline in birch, as different pollen diagrams show for the period immediately following the settlement.¹²³ This intense deforestation of the country could be partially interpreted as the result of land-clearing for agriculture. Crop-growing continued on the island well into the late Middle Ages, but the production was never on such a large scale as to attain self-sufficiency. Later, at the beginning of the twelfth century, there was a major climatic change, known as the Little Ice Age, which added to the human effects on the landscape in limiting the already meagre agricultural lands in the southern and western areas of the island.¹²⁴

Icelandic land is generally unsuitable for agriculture, as we can see through “a recent comprehensive survey [which] reveals that 73% of Iceland’s 103000 km² is affected by soil erosion, 17% of which is severe. (...) Currently c. 28% of Iceland is vegetated and forest occupies only about 1% of the total area.”¹²⁵ Undoubtedly human activity has had a negative impact on the island’s landscape, already prone to erosion. Even if cultivation played only a minor role in the economy, (just as it did in the

¹²³ Orri Vésteinsson and I. A. Simpson, ‘Fuel Utilization in Pre-Industrial Iceland: A Micro-Morphological and Historical Analysis’, in *Current Issues in Nordic Archaeology: Precedings of the 21st Conference of Nordic Archaeologists, 6-9 September 2001, Akureyri, Iceland*, ed. by Garðar Guðmundsson (Reykjavík: Society of Icelandic Archaeologists, 2004), pp. 181-187 (p. 183).

¹²⁴ Orrman, p. 273.

¹²⁵ Rannveig Ólafsdóttir and Hjalti J. Guðmundsson, ‘Holocene Degradation and Climatic Change in North-Eastern Iceland’, *The Holocene*, 12:2 (2002), 159-67 (p. 159).

Norwegian homelands) it took the form of continuous cropping¹²⁶ which tends to rapidly exhaust the soil. However, the degradation of the land was not only due to human activity. It was a process already in progress caused probably by the combination of meteorological factors and volcanic activity, as revealed by the “increased accumulation interval between the b/c (tephra) layers and the Vö-900 (tephra) layer¹²⁷ with elevation (which) shows that erosion was already taking place at higher elevations at the time of the Viking settlement.”¹²⁸ Thus, the landscape that the original settlers met was one in which the higher lands were already eroded or in the process of deterioration. Accordingly, successful cereal cultivation appears to have been undertaken in regions where the Gulf Stream provided the minimum temperature for the grain to ripen, or at an altitude at which the land was still not eroded; i.e. coastal regions. However, the climatic decline due to the Little Ice Age in the twelfth century and land erosion brought an end to cultivation in less fortunate parts of Iceland.¹²⁹ As Jón Jóhannesson puts it,

The cultivation of grain appears to have come to an end as early as the 10th or the 11th century in both the Northern Quarter and the district of Múlaþing, and in these parts of the country grain farming was never of great significance. In other areas this kind of farming continued for a longer period, particularly in regions along the seashore and in areas of thermal springs (...) Apparently the best conditions for the growing of grain were found in the districts where the effect of the Gulf Stream was strongest –that is, in the southeast, the south, and the west.¹³⁰

The contemporary saga *Borgils saga ok Hafliða* bears witness to this rapid land degradation. This saga, composed c. 1237, narrates events that took place during the first 25 years of the previous century. So, even if it presents an idealization of the past, this cannot be so far-fetched as not to describe a fertile agricultural past that might still survive in the memory of some of the contemporary readers or listeners of the saga. On

¹²⁶ Orrman, p. 273.

¹²⁷ The Vö-900 layer is also known as *Landnám layer*, deposited almost at the same time of the settlement while the b/c layers are believed to have been deposited c. 600 AD and c. 700 AD respectively.

¹²⁸ Rannveig Ólafsdóttir and Hjalti J. Guðmundsson, p. 163.

¹²⁹ Orrman, p. 273; and Rannveig Ólafsdóttir and Hjalti J. Guðmundsson, p. 165.

¹³⁰ Jón Jóhannesson, p. 296.

the occasion of a feast the narrator states that “*Á Reykjahólum váru svá góðir landskostir í þenna tíma, at þar váru aldri ófrævir akrarnir. En þat var jafnan vani, at þar var nýtt mjöl haft til beinabótar.*”¹³¹ (in Reykjahólar there were lands of such good quality at that time, that there were never uncultivated fields. And it was always the custom to have fresh meal for the guests.) The narrator’s emphasis that these were the circumstances *í þenna tíma* (at that time) seem to imply that the land at Reykjahólar, in the Western Fjords, was not fertile anymore at the time the saga was committed to writing. Similarly, in the description of Iceland in the Bishops’ saga *Guðmundar saga Arasonar: eftir Arngrím ábóta Brandsson*, written c. 1350, the agricultural situation seems to have worsened, as the narrator states that “*korn vex í fáum stöðum sunnanlands ok eigi nema bygg.*”¹³² (cereal grew in few places in the south and nothing except barley.) Astrid Ogilvie suggests that the passage in *Porgils saga ok Hafliða* “may be a comment on the state of the soil as much as on the climate.”¹³³ What really matters for the purposes of this study is the fact that cereal production in Iceland had gradually diminished, increasing the cost of producing malt-based alcoholic beverages. So, by the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, when the sagas were committed to writing, cereals and with them alcoholic drinks derived from malted grain were not only a rare but also an expensive commodity.

These two contemporary passages confirm the archaeological results concerning the agricultural situation on the island: cereal cultivation ceased in the north and east of Iceland after the 12th century. Recent excavations at Svalvarð, in the north-east of Iceland have revealed that “general agriculture is not apparent, as there were no grain processing implements (i.e. sickles, querns, grinding stones) or carbonized cereal grains

¹³¹ *ÞorHaf* X, p. 27.

¹³² *GuðAr* II, p. 150.

¹³³ Astrid E.J. Ogilvie, ‘Climatic Changes in Iceland A.D. c. 865 to 1598’, *Acta Archaeologica*, 61 (1990), 233-51 (p. 240).

excavated from the archaeological deposits”.¹³⁴ When it comes to contemporary written sources (charters, chronicles and sagas) there is no evidence of grain growing in the northern and eastern quarters, which has led scholars to believe that it had ceased in those regions by the end of the twelfth century.¹³⁵ However, we know that grain growing kept on in the vicinity of Reykjavík, in south-west Iceland, well into the sixteenth century.¹³⁶

The existence of land devoted to cultivation is also attested by several place names referring to lands for tillage. The Old Norse word for arable lands, ‘*akr*’, forms part of 9 place-names in the *Íslendinga sǫgur* and *Landnámabók*, 6 in the *Sturlunga saga*, and nowadays it survives in at least 22 place-names.¹³⁷ The place-name evidence confirms what is known from archaeological evidence: the distribution of *akr* place-names seems to be concentrated around the western part of Iceland, mainly around the Akranes and Snæfellness peninsulas, and around Akureyri, in the north. In the southern districts they are exclusively found near Gunnarsholt and the area in which *Brennu-Njáls saga* took place. Not coincidentally *Brennu-Njáls saga* is the saga which has most references to agriculture. *Akratunga*, the only *akr* place-name mentioned in the saga¹³⁸ does not survive, but it may be related to the present-day Akur, some 10km from Gunnarsholt. In the eastern part of the island only 2 *akr* place-names survive, and none

¹³⁴ Cynthia Zutter, ‘Congruence or Concordance in Archaeobotany: Assessing Micro- and Macro-Botanical Data-Sets from Icelandic Middens’, *Journal of Archaeological Science*, 26 (1999), 833-844 (p. 834).

¹³⁵ Ogilvie, p. 240.

¹³⁶ Ogilvie, p. 240.

¹³⁷ In the *Íslendinga sǫgur* and *Landnámabók* the 9 *akr* place-names are: Akrafell in Akranes (*Ldn*), Akranes (*Ldn*, *Høns*, *BjH*, *Fbr*, *Harð*, *Bárð*), Akrar in Mýrar (*Ldn*, *Eg*, *Gr*), Akreyjar in Breiðafjörðr (*Heið*), Akrar in Hqrgardalr (*Ljósv*), Akreyrr in Eyjafjörðr (*Vqð*), Akrhqfði in Axarfjörðr (*Reykð*), Akratunga near Hliðarendi (*Nj*). In the *Sturlunga saga* compilation the 6 *akr* place names are: Akur in Hvammsveit (*Strl*, *Ísl*, *ÞórðK*, *SmB*), Akraness (*Ísl*, *ÞórSk*), Akrar in Blonðu-Hlið (*Ísl*), Akrey near Helgafellssveit (*Ísl*), Akreyjar in Breiðafjörðr (*Ísl*, *ÞórðK*), Akmesingar (*Ísl*). According to the 2003 edition of the *Kortabók Íslands* there are 22 *akr* place-names in modern Iceland: Akrdalur, Akrafjall, Akrafjall, Akranes, Akraós, Akrar (4 different instances of this place-name), Akur (3 different instances of this place-name), Akurbakki, Akurbrekka, Akurey, Akureyjar (2 different instances of this place-name), Akureyri, Akurfell, Akurhóll, Akurness, Akurtraðir. This information was compiled by revising the index of proper names in the *Íslensk Fornrit* collection, in *Sturlunga saga*, and in *Kortabók Íslands* 2003 as well as the *OrðT*.

¹³⁸ *Nj* XXXIX, p. 103.

are mentioned around that area in the Old Norse corpus. Due to the lack of contemporary evidence, if we assume, together with Jón Jóhannesson, that cereal cultivation in the northern and eastern part of Iceland ceased by the twelfth century then we may conclude that these place-names bear witness to early agricultural attempts in these regions.

Even if grain production in Iceland never reached a scale that allowed self-sufficiency, some regions may have generated a surplus that permitted some degree of internal trade. Such a large production may have occurred at some farms where the land was more suited for cultivation than the rest of Iceland, such as the above mentioned case of Reykjahólar, whose fields were said to have been extremely fertile. The late thirteenth century *Fóstbræðra saga* mentions some internal meal trade at Akranes, as it states that some of the characters “*fóru út á Akranes at mjqlkaupum.*”¹³⁹ (went to Akranes to buy meal.) The information provided by the saga is not completely reliable as it was written roughly two hundred years after the events it narrates; and in any case the meal they acquired is never explicitly said to have been produced in Iceland. However, the place-name ‘Akranes’ (Peninsula of the Arable Lands) implies that at some point in time (at least during the age of the settlement) the land was considered to be fertile enough, maybe so fertile as to have produced enough surplus to trade.

Yet most of Iceland did not enjoy such a situation. Even though cereals were grown, the production was never of sufficient importance so as to grant the country agrarian autonomy. On the contrary, the production tended to diminish as time went on and cereals had to be brought from abroad in order to satisfy the demand.¹⁴⁰ Icelanders brought “mainly of barley from Norway, Orkney, and even England. But these imports never reached a significant dimension, since it was only in years of heavy yields that

¹³⁹ *Fbr* II, p. 126.

¹⁴⁰ Jón Jóhannesson, pp. 297-98.

Norway, where most of Iceland's trade was carried on, could afford to export grain."¹⁴¹ This situation led to an excessively high grain price. *Grágás*, a compilation of laws dated to the mid thirteenth century, provides us with the following price: "*Þrjár vættir mjölvægs matar við kú.*"¹⁴² (Three *vætt* [measures] of foodstuff estimated by their value in meal equal [the price of] one cow.) A different section of *Grágás* also informs us that "*átta fjórðungar eru í vætt, en tuttugu merkur skulu í fjórðungi vera*"¹⁴³ (there are 8 *fjórðungur* [weights] in a *vætt* [measure], and there should be 20 *mörk* [marks] in a *fjórðungur* [weight]) where each mark equals eight ounces or half a pound.¹⁴⁴ In other words, 240 pounds (109 kilos) of meal equalled the price of a cow or ca. 570 grams of silver.¹⁴⁵

Several sagas and *þættir* narrate trading expeditions to Norway in which homespun cloaks were exchanged for meal. *Brandkrossa þáttr* tells about the cargo of some Icelandic merchants in Norway, and states that "*var þá vanði at hafa vararfeldi at varningi, ok svá hqfðu þeir*"¹⁴⁶ (it was then a custom to have cloaks as wares, and so did they) and when someone comes to buy them "*þeir seldu honum feldi, sem hann vildi, ok mæltu mjql fyrir.*"¹⁴⁷ (they sold him the cloaks that he wanted and asked for meal as a payment.) Others obtained their meal in the Orkney Islands, as is the case of the *goði Þórir Helgason* who is said to have engaged in several trading expeditions, "*en um haustit fór hann útan ok var í Orkneyjum um vetrinn. En um várit fór hann út ok hafði bæði mjql ok annan varning*"¹⁴⁸ (and in the autumn he went abroad and was in the Orkney Islands during the winter. And in the spring he left and had with him both meal

¹⁴¹ Jón Jóhannesson, p. 307. As we have already seen, barley is not so suitable for baking as it is for brewing.

¹⁴² *Grg*, p. 478.

¹⁴³ *Grg*, p. 207 and *Grg*, p. 472.

¹⁴⁴ *IED*, *mörk*.

¹⁴⁵ "A cow of specified age and condition represented a standard value, customarily but not always, counted in the equivalent of two and a half ounces of silver or 20 six-ell ounce-units in homespun" (*Laws of Early Iceland: The Codex Regius of Grágás with Material from Other Manuscripts*, 1, trans and ed by Andrew Dennis and others, 2 vols (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1980-200), p. 392).

¹⁴⁶ *Brandkr* II, p. 187.

¹⁴⁷ *Brandkr* II, p. 188.

¹⁴⁸ *Ljósv A VII*, pp. 43-44.

and other wares) when he returned to Iceland. Unfortunately these texts do not provide information about the amounts involved in each exchange nor about the prices paid for the meal. Other texts state that it was sometimes given as a gift by Norwegian nobility to some outstanding Icelanders prior to their departure.¹⁴⁹

We may not know about the prices and the amounts of meal brought to Iceland with each expedition. However, the amounts of meal involved should have been quite large, as some texts narrate the adventures of outlaws who fled from Norway hidden in the meal cargo,¹⁵⁰ but the sagas have preserved for us what seems to be one of the main uses of the cargo: brewing. The late thirteenth century *Bandamanna saga* reports that as soon as he was betrothed, Oddr Ófeigsson sailed to the Orkneys. Once there “*Oddr kaupir þar malt ok korn, dvelsk þar nǫkkura hrið ok býr skip sitt.*”¹⁵¹ (Oddr buys there malt and corn, he stays there some time and makes his ship ready.) The next thing we get to know in the saga is that Oddr returns to Iceland and starts preparing his wedding feast which goes so well that “*þóttusk menn eigi betra brullaup þegit hafa hér á landi.*”¹⁵² (people thought that there had never been a better wedding-feast here in this land.) The text does not mention drinking at the party, but we may assume that *ql* and *mungát* were consumed in large amounts as the groom, while making his preparations for the feast, seems to have thought mainly about importing the raw materials for alcohol production: malt and corn.¹⁵³ In *Brennu-Njáls saga*, the Norwegian king offers Hrútr Herjólfsson as much meal as he wants before leaving for Iceland. The text comments that “*Þá var ært illa í landi, en þó fékk konungrinn honum mjql, sem hann vildi hafa.*”¹⁵⁴ (there was a dearth in the land, but nonetheless the king gave him as much meal as he wanted.) The idea of receiving free meal from the king, even in times of

¹⁴⁹ *Nj* VI, XXXII and CLVIII.

¹⁵⁰ “*Fórt þú til Þórólfs Loptssonar á Eyrum, ok tók hann við þér ok bar þik út í mjqlsekkum sínum.*” (you went to Þórólfr Loptsson in Eyraar, and he took you in and smuggled you abroad in his meal sacks.) (*Nj* CXIX, p. 299).

¹⁵¹ *Band* XI, p. 358.

¹⁵² *Band* XI, p. 359.

¹⁵³ Drinking at weddings, funerals and seasonal feasts will be studied in Chapter 5.

¹⁵⁴ *Nj* VI, p. 111.

scarcity, might have been a literary *topos*, a reality that might have existed only in literature. However, the meal that Hrútr got seems to have been put to a similar use as the cereal in the previous passage. Upon his return to Iceland, Hrútr gets married and the saga reports that “*drekka þeir veizluna, ok ferr hon vel fram*”¹⁵⁵ (They drank throughout the feast, and it went well) which is not surprising, considering that the groom had just imported large amounts of meal. The Norse settlers in Greenland seem to have used their corn imports in a similar fashion. *Eiríks saga rauða* reports that once Eiríkr hosted a rich merchant. During the winter Eiríkr complains that he does not have the means to provide his guests with a decent Yule feast. The merchant responds by giving him malt and meal so that “*menn þóttusk trautt þvilika rausn sét hafa í fátæku landi.*”¹⁵⁶ (men could hardly recall having seen such magnificence in such a poor land.) The saga corpus contains plenty of such occurrences in which a large feast is given soon after merchants arrive in Iceland and Greenland with a cargo of malt and meal. However this should not lead us to believe that cereals and their by-products were inexpensive or easily obtained. Thus, *Vatnsdæla saga* reports that soon after moving to Iceland two sisters decide to prepare a feast in order to increase their popularity: “*Gróa keypti malt ok bjó til veizlu ok bauð Ingimundarsonum þangat; -eigi þóttu þær systr svá lítills háttar vera*”¹⁵⁷ (Gróa bought malt and prepared a feast and invited the Ingimundsons to attend; - It was thought that the sisters were not of so little importance.), implying that throwing feasts was an act that could be undertaken only by a few privileged members of the society who could actually afford to offer alcohol. As we will see in Chapter 6, due to the display of economic power involved in such feasts, they turned into a political tool to gain support.

As we have seen, cereals and their derivatives were produced in Iceland; but, in order to guarantee the supply they had to be imported, mainly from a land whose

¹⁵⁵ *Nj* VI, p. 22.

¹⁵⁶ *Eir* VII, p. 220.

¹⁵⁷ *Vatn* XXXVI, p. 95.

production was large enough to assure its internal demand. The result was an increase in prices so that the “Icelanders spared grain, and bread was rare among the common people right up to the last decades of the nineteenth century.”¹⁵⁸ This situation must have extended to *qI* and *mungát* consumption due to the high prices involved in brewing.

If, during the medieval period, Icelanders were brewing *qI* according to modern techniques, that is minimizing evaporation and waste, it would have taken them 6-9 lbs. of malt to brew 5 gallons of ale (c. 1-1.3 kg. of malt for 6 litres). Thus, a cow’s-worth of meal would have rendered 135-200 gallons (510-756 litres) of *qI*. To these prices one should add the costs involved in the production. In order to break down the starch in the malt to obtain the minimum degree of saccharification required for the fermentation process, the mash needs to be maintained at a temperature around 65° C for at least one hour.¹⁵⁹ Fuel consumption would then increase the brewing costs, especially in a country where it was scarce, as is the case of Iceland. It has been generally believed that fuel was scarce due to the intense deforestation that followed the settlement of Iceland. However, recent research has proved that forests were carefully managed during the Commonwealth period and they only disappeared due to intense exploitation sometime in the eighteenth century, when it is reported that wood was the main fuel of nearly half of Icelandic farms.¹⁶⁰ Orri Vésteinsson and Ian Simpson argue that Icelanders had access to wood (either driftwood or wood from the forests) as a fuel source, but “it was never the only one and it is clear that for some purposes it was not even the preferred fuel.”¹⁶¹ We should then distinguish between the fuels used for industrial purposes (smithies, sharpening blades, etc) and household purposes (cooking, brewing, heating, etc). Excavations at several places identified as smithies covering the period from ca.

¹⁵⁸ Hallgerður Gísladóttir, p. 124.

¹⁵⁹ Hornsey, p. 17.

¹⁶⁰ Orri Vésteinsson and Simpson, p. 185-87.

¹⁶¹ Orri Vésteinsson and Simpson, p. 182.

900-1400 AD have shown that “*som brennstoff ble det på Island brukt trekol av bjørk, i Norge også trekol fra andre treslag. (De eneste alternativene på Island kunne være trekol av ‘gulvíðir’ og torv.)*”¹⁶² (Birch charcoal was used as a fuel in Iceland, charcoal of other kinds of wood was used in Norway. (The only alternatives in Iceland could be charcoal of ‘gulvíðir’ -yellow willow- and *torv* –peat.)) This information seems to be corroborated in *Orkneyinga saga*, where we are told that Torf-Einarr “*hann fann fyrstr manna at skera torf ór jqrðu til eldiviðar á Torfnesi á Skotlandi, því at illt var til viðar í eyjunum.*”¹⁶³ (he was the first man to dig peat for fuel, firewood being very scarce on the islands, at Tarbat Ness in Scotland).¹⁶⁴ On the other hand, excavations at halls prove contradictory. Excavations at the fireplace in the large hall at Hofstaðir, in north-eastern Iceland, have produced “several layers of distinctly different ash residues. The lower part of the series seemed to contain primarily peat-ash whereas the middle part was made of charcoal and soot and the uppermost was characterized by white ash, visually identified as wood ash.”¹⁶⁵ Meanwhile, excavations at the fireplace in Reykholt, in Borgarfjörður, Western Iceland, show no evidence of wood or charcoal. “Instead, evidence of animal dung or peat suggested that these were used as fuel [suggesting that] already by the time the fireplace was in use [between the tenth and twelfth centuries], wood for use as fuel was scarce.”¹⁶⁶ The archaeological sources thus suggest that fuel types for household needs varied between regions and epochs, most probably depending on their availability.

¹⁶² Arne Espelund, ‘*Jernframstilling i Fnjóskadalur på Island: En Kort Jamsføring med Fyresdal i Telemark*’, in *Current Issues in Nordic Archaeology: Precedings of the 21st Conference of Nordic Archaeologists, 6-9 September 2001, Akureyri, Iceland*, ed. by Garðar Guðmundsson (Reykjavík: Society of Icelandic Archaeologists, 2004), pp. 23-28 (p. 23).

¹⁶³ *Orkn VII*, p. 11.

¹⁶⁴ *Orkneyinga saga: The History of the Earls of Orkney*, trans. bt Hermann Pálsson and others (London: Hogarth Press, 1978), p 29.

¹⁶⁵ Orri Vésteinsson and Simpson, p. 181.

¹⁶⁶ Guðrún Sveinbjarnardóttir, ‘Interdisciplinary Research at Reykholt in Borgarfjörður’, in *Current Issues in Nordic Archaeology: Precedings of the 21st Conference of Nordic Archaeologists, 6-9 September 2001, Akureyri, Iceland*, ed. by Garðar Guðmundsson (Reykjavík: Society of Icelandic Archaeologists, 2004), pp. 93-97 (p. 96).

Literary sources do not help to clarify the problem of the type of fuel used for brewing purposes. As Orri Vésteinsson and Ian Simpson argue, the *Íslendingasögur* reveal that “in the minds of literate Icelanders in the 13th and 14th centuries wood was the expected fuel type. In the vast majority of cases where fuel is mentioned in the Sagas it is wood that is being burnt.”¹⁶⁷ From the results of archaeological investigation at Hofstaðir, the literary preference for wood as a fuel seems partially correct, for the lower layer shows that peat was the main fuel, while wood and charcoal appear mainly in the upper layers. However, taking into account the results at Reykholt this literary preference for wood seems to be yet another idealization of the past on the part of the saga writers/composers, as Reykholt was one of the greatest centres of power during the thirteenth century and yet there is no evidence for wood being used as fuel during this period.

The literary sources mention different terms for *ql*-brewing, namely *qlgqrð*, *qlhita*, *qlverk*, *qlheita*, *heita* (*ql*-making, *ql*-brewing, *ql*-work, *ql*-brewing and brewing respectively) on several occasions; unfortunately none of them mentions the procedure involved in brewing nor the type of fuel used. There are only two sources that seem to cast some light on this issue; however it is difficult to draw conclusions from them. *Qlkofra þáttr*, written in the mid thirteenth century, narrates the adventures of Þórhallr, better known as Qlkofri (*Ql*-hood), an early eleventh-century brewer who makes his living by selling *ql* and *mungát* at the Alþing. The *þáttr* reports that one autumn “Qlkofri fór í skóg þann, er hann átti, ok ætlaði at brenna kol, sem hann gerði.”¹⁶⁸ (Qlkofri went to the woods that he owned and intended to make charcoal, as he used to.) As Qlkofri’s main activity is brewing, we may suppose that the thirteenth-century saga audience would have understood that the charcoal he is producing is intended as fuel for *ql* and *mungát* production and, as the charcoal is said to be produced during the

¹⁶⁷ Orri Vésteinsson and Simpson, p. 182.

¹⁶⁸ *Qlk I*, p. 84.

autumn, it might have been meant for brewing *jólaql* (Yule *ql*) to be drunk during the winter festivities.¹⁶⁹ However, as the events take place during the autumn, we should not discard the possibility that the charcoal is also to be used for heating during the winter. Concerning the possible use of charcoal for brewing, it is worth mentioning that Qlkofri's woods are said to be “*upp frá Hrafnabjörgum ok austr frá Lqnguhlið*”¹⁷⁰ (beyond Hrafnabjörg and east from Lqngahlið) in north-eastern Iceland, near Akureyri. Thus, this brewer would have had his main activity in an area with several *akr* place-names in it, and if he was a historic personage we could assume that he grew his own barley for brewing. His forest and those of his neighbours are also located some 40 km from Hofstaðir, where, as has already been discussed, we have evidence for wood and charcoal as the main domestic fuel.

Borgils saga skarða, a contemporary saga included in the *Sturlunga saga* compilation, is the only other literary source that provides us with some clues about the fuel used for brewing. This saga narrates events between the years 1228-1262 and it was committed to writing roughly a hundred years after the events it describes. It reports that during a winter night at Stafaholt, in western Iceland, “*húsfreyja var at ölgerð ok með henni Björn Sigurðarson ræðismaðr ok höfðu úti hitueldinn, því at þau vildu eigi gera reyk at mönnum. Ok váru því dyrr allar opnar, er þau fóru jafnan út eða inn.*”¹⁷¹ (the house-wife was brewing *ql*, and Björn Sigurðarson the steward was with her and they had set the brewing-fire outdoors because they did not want the people in the house to endure the smoke. Therefore all the doors were open, because they were constantly going in and out.) *Hitueldr* is a compound word formed by the noun *heita* (brewing) or *hitu* (heating), and the noun *eldr*, (fire). I have chosen to translate it as ‘brewing-fire’ rather than as ‘heating-fire’ (i.e. a fire set in order to brew) as it had ben set outdoors and for this particular purpose. Even though the type of fuel is not mentioned, it is quite

¹⁶⁹ Seasonal feasts will be discussed in chapter 5.

¹⁷⁰ *Qlk* I, p. 84.

¹⁷¹ *ÞorSk* XVII, p. 129.

noteworthy that they set the fire outside because they did not want to bother those in the house with the smoke. As the scene takes place during the winter, we can safely assume that there was a fire indoors for heating purposes. Therefore the fuel used for the brewing-fire must have been of a different nature than that used indoors, that is, one that produced much more smoke, and was most probably peat (*torf*) or dung and not wood or charcoal. Another possibility is that the fuel used for heating also consisted of *torf*, as was mainly done 10 km to the east of Stafaholt, at the farm in Reykjaholt according to the archaeological evidence discussed above. If the main fuels for heating in both farms were indeed *torf* and dung, then the need to brew outdoors might be due to the fact that the amounts of fuel required to keep the contents of a large cauldron at a temperature of between 50-60°C were larger than those needed to warm a room, making the quantity of smoke produced unbearable for those inside. In some places this situation may have led to the construction of buildings devoted only to brewing, such as the *heituhús* (brewing-house) at the Alþing, mentioned in *Orms þáttr Stórólfssonar*, included in the *Flateyjarbók* version of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*.¹⁷²

Malt, fuel and water are the only ingredients needed for brewing, as the mash tends to be rapidly attacked by wild yeasts that lead to the fermentation process. As for the equipment, just a cauldron is required, but the cauldron-prices helped to increase the cost of brewing. We know from *Grágás* that “*járnketill nýr og óeldur, og veigi hálf a vætt og liggi í átta skjólur, fyrir fimtán aura*.”¹⁷³ (an iron cauldron, new and never put on the fire, and weighing half a *vætt*¹⁷⁴ and holding eight buckets, is worth fifteen *aurar*.¹⁷⁵) The editors of *Grágás* comment that “such a cauldron would have been made of riveted sheets of wrought iron. The thickness of the metal in one weighing 40 lbs

¹⁷² *ÓTFlat* CDXIII, p. 5.

¹⁷³ *Grg*, p. 476.

¹⁷⁴ Half a *vætt* amounts to c. 18 kg.

¹⁷⁵ One *aura* was a weight of just over 27 grams of silver. (*Laws of Early Iceland 2*, trans. and ed. by Dennis and others, p. 389).

with a capacity of c. 7.5 gallons (ca. 28 litres) would be between 0.5 and 0.6 cm.”¹⁷⁶ As metal objects can be easily repaired, the acquisition of a cauldron would have been a once-in-a-life-time investment. However the c. 400 grams of silver (or 6 cows) involved in the transaction would represent a large investment that perhaps most households could not afford.

The mythological lay *Hymiskviða*, in the *Poetic Edda*, could reflect a common situation in the world of men when the Æsir impose themselves at Ægir’s place asking for something to drink just to find out that Ægir did not have a cauldron to brew in. This situation can be extrapolated to a human context, in which perhaps several of the poorest farmers did not have the means to buy a cauldron to brew in when they received the visit of their *goðar* asking for drinks after a long journey, such as those instances in which Egill is offered *sýra* instead of *ql*. In this same Eddic poem Þórr sets out on a long journey in order to steal a *ketill*, or *qlkióll* (cauldron) described as “*rúmbrugðinn hverr, rastar diúpan*.”¹⁷⁷ (which is capacious, one mile deep.) This cauldron would not have been perceived as extraordinary not only for its size but also for its price!

The 8-bucket (7.5 gallons-28 litres) cauldron mentioned in *Grágás* could have been the standard size for price-setting, which does not necessarily imply that it was the average cauldron used at most farms. It was far too expensive to be the most common cauldron in use. On the other hand, a big cauldron would also minimize the fuel-costs involved in brewing since more liquid could be brewed at one time; perhaps larger cauldrons were used for the production of *ql* and *mungát*. Unfortunately for us, the iron used in the cauldrons was commonly melted and reused once a cauldron was damaged beyond repair. This situation leaves us with only a few and poorly preserved archaeological remains of cauldrons deposited as grave goods. Overall, fragments of 5

¹⁷⁶ *Laws of Early Iceland 2*, trans. and ed. by Dennis and others, p 207 fn. 79.

¹⁷⁷ *Hym 5*.

different cauldrons have been identified in an equal number of graves, but the remains are too fragmentary as to reach any conclusions about their size.¹⁷⁸

The literary sources seldom mention the size of cauldrons, except to state that they were either big or small. Two exceptions are the thirteenth-century *Ljósvetninga saga* and *Orms þáttur Stórolfssonar*, written in the late fourteenth century, but most probably using older sources. The first reports the gift of a “*tuttugu skjólna ketill*”¹⁷⁹ (a twenty-bucket cauldron), i.e. containing c. 18.75 gallons or 70 litres. Based on its size, this cauldron could well have been meant for brewing instead of cooking. If the prices for a cauldron were directly proportional to that mentioned in *Grágás*, then this particular one would have cost 15 cows or 1.2 kg of silver and could only have been acquired by a very powerful man, as was the case of Þorvarðr, the *goði* who offered it as a gift. *Orms þáttur Stórolfssonar* mentions a brewing cauldron at the Alþing’s brewing-house: “*hituketill hjá heituhúsinu, sá er tók tvær tunnur.*”¹⁸⁰ (a brewing-cauldron at the brewing-house which could hold two barrells.) A *tunna* (barrel) denotes a measure and does not seem to have been used before the thirteenth century¹⁸¹ but there are no extant sources that allow us to estimate the volume they refer to.

All the evidence seems to indicate that brewing was an activity performed by both genders. This can be perceived in the nouns *heitumaðr* (brewer) both extant only in *Íslendinga saga*¹⁸² and in a 1295 charter in which the Norwegian King, Eirik Magnusson passes the following law: “*Swa hafuum ver ok fulkomlega firirbodet samdrykkiur ædr gilldi leidsagumanna. gullsmida. iærnsnida. Englandz faara. suæina. vinnumanna. hæito manna. hæimakuenna ok allar adrar samdrykkiur. vtan sktyningar*

¹⁷⁸ See Kristján Eldjárn, *Kuml og Haugfé: Úr Heiðnum Sið á Íslandi*, ed. by Adolf Friðriksson, 2nd edn (Reykjavík: Mál og Menning, Þjóðminjasafn Íslands, 2000) This information makes reference to graves 35, 40, 63, 74 and 135.

¹⁷⁹ *Ljós* XVIII (XXVIII), p. 93.

¹⁸⁰ *ÓTFlat* CDXIII, p. 4-5.

¹⁸¹ *IED*, *tunna*.

¹⁸² *Heitumaðr* appears in *Ísl* XXXIV, 267. *OrðT* does not return any entries for *heitumaðr* or *heitukona*. Other dictionaries just provide the two examples quoted here. *IED* has an entry for *heitukona* (female brewer) but it makes reference to the charter quoted below, in which the term is *heitu manna*.

villium ver at halldezst æftir fornnum sidvanda.”¹⁸³ (Also, we have perfectly prohibited drinking gatherings or banquets of lode-sayers, goldsmiths, ironsmiths, merchants trading with England, lads, labourers, brewers, housemaids and all other drinking gatherings outside the taverns that we hold following the ancient custom. ¹⁸⁴) Even though these terms are rarely used in the literary sources, there are several occasions in which both men and women are said to have engaged in that activity, as will be appreciated throughout this study. When it comes to archaeological remains, the 5 cauldrons found in Iceland, deposited in male and double burials (containing the remains of a male and a female¹⁸⁵) seem to confirm the literary evidence. With the coming of Christianity, the activity also seems to have been an occupation of the clergy, as was also the case on the continent. Nevertheless, the production of *ql* and *mungát* by the clergy in the north could have been undertaken also for liturgical use, as beer seems to have been sometimes used to perform the sacraments of baptism and communion. *Íslendinga saga* mentions a monk called Þórólfr and the narrator draws special attention to the fact that he was an *ql*-brewer, for on the few occasions he is mentioned, the text notes that he was an *qlgerðarmaðr* (*ql*-maker, brewer): “*hann var með Þórólfi munk ölgerðarmanni*”¹⁸⁶ (he was with the monk Þórólfr, an *ql*-maker) and “*Þórólfr munkr frá Þvera, ölgerðarmaðr*”.¹⁸⁷ (Þórólfr the monk from Þvera, an *ql*-brewer). There is also a certain priest that seems to have been involved in brewing or in drinking as he was known as “*Þórarinn prestr kaggi*”¹⁸⁸ (Priest Þórarinn the keg or cask) though the motivations for this nickname are uncertain. These Icelandic priests might have used beer for other purposes than drinking, as two Norwegian charters bring forward evidence for liturgical uses of beer. These are letters sent by Pope Gregory the IX to

¹⁸³ DN XIX, pp. 434-35.

¹⁸⁴ Taverns and other drinking locations, as well as the regulations involved in their handling will be discussed in chapter 4.

¹⁸⁵ Kristján Eldjárn, graves 35, 40, 63, 74 and 135.

¹⁸⁶ *Ísl* CLXXII, p. 488.

¹⁸⁷ *Ísl* CLXXIII, p. 491.

¹⁸⁸ *Ísl* CLXXXIII, p. 508.

Sigurðr, Archbishop of Nidaros. In one of these, dated July 8, 1241, the Pope gives Sigurðr some advice about the administration of the sacraments:

*Cum, sicut ex tua relatione didicimus, nonnunquam propter aque penuriam infantes terre tue contingat in cervisia baptizari, tibi tenore presentium respondemus, quod cum secundum doctrinam evangelicam oporteat eos ex aqua et spiritu sancto renasci, non debent reputari rite baptizati, qui in cervisia baptizantur.*¹⁸⁹

(Since, as we learned from your relating of events, sometimes it happens that, on account of lack of water the children of your land are baptized in beer, the movement of yourself at hand, we answer; because following the instruction of the gospel, water is necessary to those to be reborn in the holy spirit, you should not count the baptismal rites of those who have been baptized in beer.)

Even if baptism in beer due to lack of water was not approved by the Pope, it was among the emergency baptism procedures allowed by the Norwegian church. So far, we have evidence of this being done at least once, with the subsequent doubts of archbishop Sigurd about its legitimacy. This points to a particular understanding of the way to administer the sacraments and of the symbolism of the fluids involved in them, not only on the part of some priests, but also on the part of the head of the Norwegian Church, not to talk about the laity. However, this last procedure seems to have its roots in the amendments to the Gulapíng's Church Law ordinances, ordered in 1164 by the King Magnus under the advice of Eysteinn, who was elected archbishop of Nidaros in 1157. Among Magnus' additions to the law, we find the following, regarding baptism in case of emergency: "*M[agnus]. En ef vatne ma eigi na. þa skal skira i hverfkonar væto er na ma. En ef engri ner væto. þa skal rækia i lova ser oc gera kross a briošte. oc mellom herða.*"¹⁹⁰ (And if water can not be obtained then it [the child] shall be baptized in any liquid that is found. And if there is no liquid [at hand] then one should spit in the palm of the hand and make the sign of the cross on the breast and between the shoulders [of the child].) Even though this authorization to baptize with any fluid that was at hand can not be taken as evidence for baptism with beer (or for that case with any other alcoholic beverages) at least it leaves that possibility open, as seems to be confirmed by the Pope's letter. The

¹⁸⁹ *DN I*, p. 21.

¹⁹⁰ *NGL I*, pp. 21, 12.

second Norwegian charter making reference to the use of beer during the sacraments also comes from a letter from Pope Gregory the IX to Archbishop Sigurðr. In it, the Pope advises Sigurðr to discontinue the use of beer instead of wine during the Communion. This practice seems to have sprouted due to the lack and high cost of wine in Norway. But this charter will be analyzed below, in section 2.4, which is devoted to wine.

Ql and *mungát* are the alcoholic beverages most commonly mentioned in our sources. Their popularity may be due to the fact that, even if expensive, malt and cereals could be easily transported and stored while the raw materials for other kinds of beverages were not only more expensive but also not easy to store, as we will see in the following sections. Maltose-based drinks, in comparison with other beverages, are also relatively easier to brew and store. This might have also contributed to their popularity.

2.3-GLUCOSE-BASED DRINKS: *MJQDR*

Glucose-based beverages, namely *mjqðr*, are produced by dissolving sugar or honey in warm water. The mixture is then attacked by wild yeasts which transform part of the glucose into alcohol. As the sugar-cane was not introduced to Europe until the sixteenth century, the main source to manufacture this kind of alcoholic drink during the Middle Ages was honey. Nowadays, the product we know as mead is produced from honey, but that does not guarantee that the Norse beverage *mjqðr* was made using the same ingredients. Perhaps the best evidence to prove that *mjqðr* was indeed made out of honey comes from two different passages in Snorri's *Edda*. In the section known as *Háttatal* Snorri quotes the following verse:

*Hreintjqrnum gleðr horna (horn ná lítt at þorna,
mjqðr hegnir bql bragna) bragningr skipa sagnir;
fólkhqmlu gefr framla framlyndr viðum gamlar,
hinn er heldr fyrir skot skjqldum, skjqldungr hunangs qldur*¹⁹¹

(The prince gladdens the ships' crews with pure lakes of horns[drink].
The horn does not get to dry out too much. Mead keeps back men's
miseries. The bold-hearted king who holds shields in front of missiles

¹⁹¹ *Hát* 24:15.

gives generously old honey-waves [mead] to army-rod-[sword] trees
[warriors].)¹⁹²

Here, as one can see, *mjqðr* is equated with ‘honey waves’, implying that the beverage is actually a honey-based product. The second passage in which honey is clearly involved in mead production is provided by Snorri in *Skáldskaparmál*: “*Þeir blendu hunangi við blóðit ok varð þar af mjqðr.*”¹⁹³ (They mixed honey with the blood and it became *mjqðr*.)¹⁹⁴ Furthermore *mjqðr* and “the word ‘mead’ [are] cognate with the Sanskrit for honey [i.e. *madhu*], and it is therefore probably an ancient drink.”¹⁹⁵ *Mjqðr* is also cognate with Old High German *metu* or *mitu* and with Old English *meodo*, all coming from the Indo-Germanic *médhu*, meaning “*honig, bes. met*”¹⁹⁶ (honey, especially mead), related to the Greek *μέδου* meaning “*wein*”¹⁹⁷ (wine). Hence, Norse *mjqðr* was most probably an alcoholic beverage made out of honey and somehow similar to modern mead.

However, with exception of skaldic poetry and of both Snorri’s *Edda* and the *Poetic Edda*, the word *mjqðr* does not appear very often in the literary corpus and it is completely absent in the *Diplomatarium Islandicum*.¹⁹⁸ Ian S. Hornsey explains that

Mead probably became an outdated drink for the Vikings long before it did for the Anglo-Saxons, and the possibility exists that *mjqðr* signifies ‘mead’ (in which case one could equate [Old English] *meðu* with [Old Norse] *mjqðr*.) For both the Vikings and the Anglo-Saxons it seems as though honey-based drinks were superseded in popularity by those with a cereal base.¹⁹⁹

The few occasions in which *mjqðr* is mentioned in the literature, in comparison with *ql* and *mungát*, support Hornsey’s point of view that *mjqðr* was a rather outdated drink at

¹⁹² Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, ed. and trans. by Anthony Faulkes (London: Everyman, 1987), p. 183.

¹⁹³ *Skpm* G57, p. 3.

¹⁹⁴ The passages involving the mead of poetry will be studied in Chapter 3.

¹⁹⁵ Hagen, *Second Handbook*, p. 230.

¹⁹⁶ *IEW*, *médhu*.

¹⁹⁷ *IEW*, *médhu* and *AEW*, *mjqðr*.

¹⁹⁸ In the *Fornaldar sqgur*, *mjqðr* is mentioned in *Bós* XIII, p. 316; *GHR* XXXVII, p. 275; *Heiðr* XI, p. 55; *Vqls* XXV, p. 172 and XXIX, p. 184. In the *Íslendinga sqgur* *mjqðr* is mentioned in *Nj* XXX, p. 78; *Vatn* II, p. 5; *Finnb* XXIX, p. 301 (See *OrðT*, *mjqðr*). In *Sturlunga saga* *mjqðr* is mentioned in *GuðDý* XIV, 190 and; *Ísl* CIX, 387, CXI, 388, CLIV, 458, CLV, 459, CLXX, 483. (see the index of *Sturlunga saga*).

¹⁹⁹ Hornsey, p. 254.

the time in which the sagas were committed to parchment. *Mjqðr* seems to have become the subject of myth and poetry (hence its common mention in the eddic and skaldic corpus), but not an actual beverage to be found at most feasts or drinking occasions. Christine E. Fell suggests that “it is tempting to suppose that the ubiquity of poetic mead like that of poetic gold is largely a nostalgic fiction of the Anglo-Saxons, since prevalence of the one receives as little support from linguistic evidence as prevalence of the other does from archaeology.”²⁰⁰ This seems to be also the case in Norse culture as one can perceive from the few occasions in which this drink is mentioned in the saga corpus and the lack of compound words derived from *mjqðr*, *mjqðdrekk*²⁰¹ “*drikkekar hvoraf man drikker Mjød*”²⁰² (drinking vessel from which people drink mead) or “mead cask”,²⁰³ and *mjoðrann*²⁰⁴ “‘*methaus, trinkhalle*’ nur poetisch gebraucht, möglicherweise nach dem Vorbild von ae. *meodu-ærn gebildet*” (‘mead hall, drinking hall’ only poetically used, possibly constructed after the Old English model *meodu-ærn*) being the only ones attested in our sources, in comparison with the plethora of compound words derived from *ql*. Accordingly, *mjqðr* and its symbolic meanings will be mostly studied in Chapter 3, when we analyze the mythic roles and origins of alcohol and its possible connections with poetry.

As we will see, *mjqðr* was the sole alcoholic beverage consumed by the *einherjar* in Valhǫll²⁰⁵ but it seems that at some point it lost its high status as the most luxurious of beverages – consumed in the otherworld by a few selected men - as in the eddic poem *Grimnismál* we are told that “*við vín eitt / vápnqǫfugr Óðinn æ lifir*”²⁰⁶ (on wine only/ glorious in weapons Óðinn lives), implying perhaps that *vín* (wine) took the role of the most prestigious of drinks, becoming the preferred beverage of one of the

²⁰⁰ Christine E. Fell, ‘Old English *Beor*,’ *Leeds Studies in English*; New Series, 8 (1975), 76-95 (p. 80).

²⁰¹ The compound *mjqðdrekk* appears in *Eg* XLVI, p. 117; *Laxd* XLIII, p. 131, see *OrðT*, *mjqðdrekk*.

²⁰² *OGNS*, *mjqðdrekk*.

²⁰³ *IED*, *mjqðdrekk*.

²⁰⁴ Preserved only in *Akv* 9. All the other indexes to our sources do not provide other compounds apart from these two.

²⁰⁵ See Chapter 3.

²⁰⁶ *Grm* 19.

major deities in the afterlife. Richard Lowry proposes that this change in attitude towards *mjqðr* might have been due to the fact that “wine would have functioned just as effectively as mead in this capacity for it, too, was expensive to produce and it had the added advantage of being exotic.”²⁰⁷

But why was *mjóðr* superseded by other drinks – either maltose-based as a common drink or by *vín* as a prestigious drink? The answer to this question may be found in the high cost and difficulties in obtaining honey to produce it.

When it comes to honey production, the only archaeological evidence for beekeeping in the Western Norse settlements comes from the Coppergate site in York, where an artefact interpreted as a beehive was excavated in the 1980s. There was “a layer rich in honey bee corpses together with twisted straw, interpreted as a ‘*skep*’ beehive, in Anglo-Scandinavian levels at 16-22 Coppergate. Clearly bees were kept by the inhabitants of York, at least a proportion of whom enjoyed honey as a sweetener or fermented as mead.”²⁰⁸ Unfortunately, we do not have any records or evidence of beekeeping in Norway or Iceland. However, if apiculture was practiced in Scandinavia, the production could not have been very high, as one can gather from “an anonymous thirteenth-century [English] husbandry [that] gives two gallons as the average annual yield from a hive. A good hive today would yield about four times that amount.”²⁰⁹ Honey seems to have been scarce in the North, so that it was apt to become the subject of myth. For example, in the ninth century the Anglo-Saxon traveller Wulfstan reports that in a land called Estland “*þær bið swiðe mycel hunig & fiscað, & se cyning & þa ricostan men drinicað myran meolc, & þa unspedigan & þa þeowan drincað medo.*”²¹⁰ (there is a great deal of honey and fishing. The king and the most powerful men drink

²⁰⁷ Richard M.P. Lowry, ‘The Consumption and Symbolism of Alcohol in Anglo-Saxon England’, *Medieval Life: A New Magazine of the Middle Ages*, 1: Winter (1995), 7-9 (p. 8).

²⁰⁸ A.R. Hall, and others, ‘*Environment and Living Conditions at Two Anglo-Scandinavian Sites*’, *The Archaeology of York*, 14:4 (York: York Archaeological Trust, 1983), p. 207.

²⁰⁹ Hagen, *Second Handbook*, p. 151.

²¹⁰ ‘Wulfstan’s Account’, ed. by Niels Lund, trans. by Christine E. Fell in *Two Voyagers at the Court of King Alfred: The Ventures of Ohthere and Wulfstan together with the Description of Northern Europe from the Old English Orosius* (York: William Sessions Limited, 1984), pp. 22-25 (p. 23).

mare's milk, the poor men and the slaves drink mead.²¹¹) Such an account would have produced a great surprise in Anglo-Saxon England and in Viking Age Norway and Iceland for, as we have seen earlier in this chapter, milk and lactose-based products were the drinks proper for slaves,²¹² while *mjqðr* and other costly beverages were the drinks proper for kings and rich men.

In general, *mjqðr* was not easily brewed, mostly due to the fact that “honey is not easy to produce in large quantities, and the fact that it was the only sweetener available in Anglo-Saxon England [and in Scandinavia] must have enhanced the value of the mead produced from it.”²¹³ This might have contributed to the fact that *mjqðr* became the most prestigious beverage at a certain point in Norse history. But, at the same time, its unavailability and difficulties in obtaining the raw materials to brew it must have been the main reason for *mjqðr* to become a drink available only in the otherworld, while *vín*, easier to obtain, took its place as the prestigious beverage. *Mjqðr* was difficult to obtain not just due to the small amounts of honey that could be produced but also due to the particularities of honey storage and brewing. As Ann Hagen puts it,

heating to 68 degrees Celsius will destroy honey-fermenting yeasts, but we do not know if this was practised [and] honey gathered in a bad season or kept above 55 degrees Fahrenheit [13 degrees Celsius] will tend to produce an acidic scum and become less palatable.²¹⁴

These factors may mean that *mjqðr* was not commonly brewed, if only for the difficulties involved in the process and the unavailability of honey. While it could be easily stored as a sweetener, the storage of honey for brewing required a certain temperature-control in order to produce a palatable beverage.

Mjqðr, as an already brewed product, and honey, as a sweetener and for brewing, were most probably imported from England and the continent. But the

²¹¹ ‘Wulfstan’s Account’, ed. by Lund, trans. by Fell Fell, p. 23.

²¹² See above, section 2.1.

²¹³ Lowry, p. 8.

²¹⁴ Hagen, *Second Handbook*, p. 151.

historical sources also render a few facts related to the sale of *mjqðr* and honey. In *Norges Gamle Love* there are just five regulations concerning *mjqðr* trade and just as many concerning honey imports. This is a very small number of regulations if one compares them with those involving the trade of *vin*,²¹⁵ *ql* and *mungát*, not to mention that the regulations involving *mjqðr* mention it in conjunction with other alcoholic beverages. This may prove that *mjqðr* was actually being imported in Norway but, it may also suggest that the trade was not of such a large scale (as was the case with other alcoholic beverages) as to deserve much attention in trade regulations. The law corpus states in *Kong Haakon Magnussöns Retterbod om Kjöbstevne i Byerne for Tunsberg og Oslo*, passed in Bergen on November 15, 1316, that

skulu utlændzkir men aller hafa upskipat innan átta dagha hit fyrsta sidan þeir hafa atlagu orlof fenget. i bryggju budir malt. miol. rugh. korn. hvæiti. flur. flesk. baunir. ortar. sild. oc allan annan þunga varengh oc allre i garda upskipa [...] yttan um bior. miod oc mungat. hunang oc lysi. skreid. smor. vara. oc allar annar varengar uttan þungga varennengh skipizt upp i gardz budir .²¹⁶

(all foreigners shall have unloaded, within eight days since they first got permission to land. in the storage booths malt. meal. rye. grains. wheat. fine meal. meat. beans. herbs. herring and all other heavy wares and unload all into the yard [...] with the exception of *bjórr*. *mjqðr* and *mungát*. honey and candles. dried fish. butter. homespun. And all other light wares which shall be unloaded into the yard's booths.)

One day earlier King Hákon Magnússon approved exactly the same law for Bergen; with the sole difference that *mungát* is not mentioned among the alcoholic beverages.²¹⁷ In general, the only thing we can gather from these laws is that *mjqðr*, together with other beverages and honey, was being imported into Norway. As with any other wares, it had to be transported to the royal yard where it was priced and taxed.

There is only one extant law concerning the price of *mjqðr*. This price list was approved by King Hákon Magnússon in an undated charter which states that that one shall pay “*tunna med sild iii marker. tunna biors ii marker. tunna med miodh iii*

²¹⁵ *Vin* will be analyzed in the following section of this chapter.

²¹⁶ *NGL* III, p. 125.

²¹⁷ This is stated as part of *Kong Haakon Magnussöns Retterbod om Kjöbstevne i Byerne for Bergen* on November 14, 1316, See *NGL* III, p. 122.

*marker*²¹⁸ (a barrel with herring 3 marks. a barrel of *bjórr* 2 marks. a barrel with *mjqðr* 3 marks). This means that a barrel of *mjqðr* would cost approximately 24 ounces or 700 grams of silver, while a barrel of *bjórr* would cost 16 ounces or 460 grams of silver.

As we have already seen in the previous section, the prices of alcoholic beverages were state regulated, and so was their sale. Accordingly, on January 29, 1377, King Hákon Magnússon made the following stipulation concerning the sale of *mjqðr* as part of his amendments to the privileges of the Hansa:

*Swa och forbiodher ver ollom wtlendiskæ monum at kaupa a lande nema a torghe. Swa forbiodum wer oc þeim at bryggia seer mungat sielfuer til þaruendæ eda til vthsalu vthen koupa þet þer som þet er falt af borghenne. [...] swo fyrer biodhom wer oc þeim at sælia nokon þungan warnigh minna en pundum heilom swo bior miodh tunnom en ey minne.*²¹⁹

(We also forbid all foreigners to trade on land with exception of the marketplace. We also forbid them to brew *mungát* for their own needs or for sale without buying that which is available from the [town] citizens [...] we also forbid them to sell certain light wares of less than a whole pound in weight such as *bjórr* [or] *mjqðr* barrels that are small.)

It is interesting to note that Hanseatic merchants might have been brewing their own *mungát*, perhaps due to the fact that alcohol prices in Norway were extremely high or to avoid paying the taxes imposed on the local produce. Also, this statute might have forbidden them from selling small amounts of *bjórr* or *mjqðr* as it might have been difficult for the state to tax such transactions. The only other regulation concerning the sale of *mjqðr* also seems to keep foreigners from trading it, as it precludes the ownership of a yard, which might have been available only to local merchants. This regulation (as we have already seen in the section concerning maltose-based beverages) on trade and taxes, passed in Nidaros on January 24, 1377, states that “*fyrst at uphaffue at engom manne. utlænnðskum ne indlænnðskum huarcke kall ne konno. loffuett æder thoolest at haffua nockorm ollthap i bqq warum huarcke winn miod ne bior æder*

²¹⁸ NGL III, p. 205.

²¹⁹ NGL III, p. 200.

mumgatt,²²⁰ *wthan thennom æinum sem garda æiga.*”²²¹ (To begin with, that no person, foreign or local, man or woman, is allowed or tolerated to have an *ql*-serving²²² whether the wares are wine, *mjqðr*, *bjórr* or *mungát*, in the town, except those [persons] who own a yard.) As we have already seen, this law seems to be an attempt to regulate the alcohol-selling places in order to control the tax payments involved in the transactions.

No matter how much the state regulated the prices and how much it prevented foreigners from freely selling their wares, the Norwegian Crown tried to encourage merchants to sail to Norway with wares, such as honey, that were scarce in the land. So, on May 10, 1318, King Hákon Magnússon approved the following law concerning foreign merchants in Tunsberg. It reads:

*Hakon &c. uer uilium ydar kunnicht gera at uer uilium at aller utlenzkir men af hvariu lande sem hvarir ero oc ei ero uarer ovinir þeir sem sigla uilia til Tunsberghs se þeir gudi oc oss velkomner oc sigli i allum timum bede uetar oc sumar oc seli frialsegha allan sin varneng stadar monnum edar adrum norqnom bondom edar kaupmonnum. pundum þunga varnengh, tunnum bior, vin oc hunangh fatum.*²²³

(Hákon &c. We want to let you know that we want that all foreigners of all the lands which there are, and which are not our enemies, who wish to sail to Tunsberg to feel God’s and our welcoming; and to sail at all times both during winter and summer and sell in peace all their wares to the townsmen or to any other Norse farmers or merchants. pounds of heavy wares, barrels of *bjórr*, *vin* and honey vats.)

Here we can see once more that honey was being imported into Norway. Perhaps the fact that it is listed together with *bjórr* and *vin* implies that it was intended for brewing rather than as a sweetener.

Unfortunately the historical sources are too scant to reach any conclusions. The only fact that seems to be certain is that *mjqðr* and honey were imported to Norway, but the small number of references may imply that it was not a large-scale trade. We can well imagine that the situation in Iceland was similar. In general, the almost complete absence of *mjqðr* in the historical sources agrees with the almost complete lack of

²²⁰ Spelled *mumgatt* in the original.

²²¹ *NGL* III, p. 196.

²²² *Ollthap* (*ql*-serving). Even though the word makes reference only to *ql*, it seems to be a generic drink for serving any other kind of alcoholic beverage.

²²³ *NGL* III, p. 131.

references to the beverage in saga literature. *Mjqðr* gives the impression of being a discontinued or rare beverage that belonged more to the realm of myth or poetry than to everyday life in medieval Scandinavia.

The evidence from saga literature is not more encouraging than the historical evidence. As mentioned earlier on, *mjqðr* is mentioned only 5 times in the *Íslendinga sqgur*, 6 times in the *Sturlunga saga* compilation and 5 times in the *Fornaldar sqgur*. The occasions in which *mjqðr* is mentioned in the *Íslendinga sogur* may be scant and brief, but it is possible to extract some information from them. For example, in *Finnboga saga* we are told that a feast was organized. For it “*eru öxn felld ok mungát heitt, mjöðr blandinn ok mönnum boðit.*”²²⁴ (oxen were killed and *mungát* was brewed, *mjqðr* was blended and people were invited.) Since the blending of *mjqðr* is mentioned in connection with the brewing of *mungát* it seems that the act of blending *mjqðr* was the equivalent of brewing it rather than diluting it with water in order to smooth the flavour, as was the case with *vín* and *sýra*. Perhaps the blending refers to the actual diluting of honey in warm water in order to let it ferment. The second reference to *mjqðr* occurs in *Njáls saga*, when Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi and Kolskeggr engage in a fight at Tunsberg, in Norway. There we are told that “*síðan tók Kolskeggr jústu eina fulla af miði ok drakk ok barðisk eptir þat.*”²²⁵ (then Kolskeggr took a small goblet full of *mjqðr* and drank it and fought on after that.) Here it is interesting to note that the scene takes place in Tunsberg, where, as we have already seen *mjqðr* was being imported during the fourteenth century. This is, perhaps, a historical reference within the saga, as Icelanders travelling in Norway knew that the places where *mjqðr* was most likely to be found were the market-towns, such as Bergen, Tunsberg or Niðarós. It is also noteworthy that Kolskeggr takes just a *jústa* (measure) of *mjqðr*. Four *jústar* were

²²⁴ *Finnb XXX*, p. 301.

²²⁵ *Nj XXX*, p. 78.

the equivalent of a *bolli* (bowl)²²⁶ which means that the amount of *mjqðr* taken by Kolskeggr was a rather small one. Perhaps this is due to the fact that, unlike *ql* or *mungát* which were drunk in large measures, *mjqðr* was a rare and/or expensive drink, so that it was drunk in small measures.

In *Egils saga* we find Norsemen pillaging *mjqðr* when Egill is raiding in the East. There, after attacking a farm “*Egill tók undir hqnd ser mjqðdrekku eina vel mikla ok bar undir hendi sér*”²²⁷ (Egill picked up a large *mjqðr*-cask and carried it under his arms) and after the raid “*sagði Egill, at mjqðdrekku þá vill hann hafa at afnámsfé.*”²²⁸ (Egill said that he wanted to have the *mjqðr*-cask as his share.) This again is in agreement with the historical sources for, as we have seen, Wulfstan reported that in the East *mjqðr* was abundant. However for a thirteenth-century Icelander or for Norsemen plundering in the East a large cask full of *mjqðr* could have been just as valuable as a chest full of treasure due to the high price of alcohol.²²⁹ Finally, we have a further mention of *mjqðr* in *Vatnsdæla saga* as part of what appears to be a comment on the relaxed customs of the time in which the saga was written. In the saga Ketill reprehends his son Þorsteinn for not attacking a group of bandits who are ravaging the region. In order to incite Þorsteinn into action, Ketill tells him that:

*Qnnur gerisk nú atferð ungra manna en þá er ek var ungr, þá girntusk menn á nokkur framaverk, annattveggja at ráðask í hernað eða afla fjár ok sóma með einhverjum atferðum, þeim er nqkkur mannhætta var í, en nú vilja ungir menn gerask heimaelskir ok sitja við bakelda ok kýla vqmb sína á miði ok mungáti, ok þverr því karlmennska ok harðfengi.*²³⁰

(Now young men behave differently than when I was young, then men desired to achieve feats, either by plundering or by gaining wealth and honour with some deeds that were dangerous. And now young men are fond of staying at home and sit by the fire and fill their stomach with *mjqðr* and *mungát*, and that is why manhood and valour are on the wane.)

²²⁶ *IED, justa*. (Spelled *iústa* in the original.)

²²⁷ *Eg XLVI*, p. 117.

²²⁸ *Eg XLVI*, p. 118.

²²⁹ A *mjqðdrekkja* (*mjqðr*-cask) is also mentioned in *Laxd XLIII*, p. 131, but it is just mentioned *en passant* and does not seem to contain *mjqðr*.

²³⁰ *Vatn II*, pp. 4-5.

In this nostalgic speech *mjqðr* and *mungát* appear as a symbol of decadence. However, the passage does not tell us much about *mjqðr* production or consumption. The mention of *mjqðr* as a beverage that is usually consumed is in contrast with the almost complete absence of this drink in the *Íslendinga sqgur*. Perhaps its mention refers more to the consumption of alcohol in general than to the consumption of *mjqðr* in particular. That is, *mjqðr* is mentioned as a symbol of men's activities than as an actual fact.

In general, the references to *mjqðr* in the *Íslendinga sqgur* confirm some of the information we got from the historical sources. First of all, the fact that it is said to be drunk in rather small vessels may confirm that it was a rare and expensive drink. This fact is also confirmed by the passage in which Egill claims a *mjqðr*-cask as his looting-share. This same passage in *Egils saga* also supports Wulfstan's report about *mjqðr* being abundant in the East. Finally, the mention of *mjqðr* in connection with Tunsberg is supported by the laws in which *mjqðr* trade was regulated in this Norwegian town.

In the *Sturlunga saga* compilation *mjqðr* is mentioned only 6 times. Most of them just state that people drank it at feasts, however the beverage is portrayed as a rather rare one. On the occasion of a feast we are told that “*mjöðrinn var borin í berlum undir Hraun um morgininn eftir.*”²³¹ (the *mjqðr* was carried in barrels to Hraun the next morning.). *Mjqðr* might have been presented as a gift to the persons holding the feast,²³² or perhaps it was carried to the feasting site because people there did not have adequate brewing instruments.²³³ In any case, the saga reports that the party “*var þar in fegrsta veizla. Skorti eigi góðan mjöð.*”²³⁴ (there was a splendid feast. There was no shortage of *mjqðr*.) This is the only commentary that the saga author makes about the feast, and his description of it being the most splendid feast might be in connection with the fact that ‘*skorti eigi góðan mjöð*’ (there was no shortage of *mjqðr*), that is, the feast was splendid

²³¹ *Ísl* CIX, p. 387.

²³² Alcoholic beverages as part of the Norse gift-giving culture will be discussed in Chapter 6.

²³³ As we have already seen earlier in this chapter, brewing tools and fuel could be rather expensive.

²³⁴ *Ísl* CXI, p. 388.

due to the excess of alcohol, and even better, due to the excess of *mjqðr*, which was a rather expensive beverage. In a similar context *Íslendinga saga* also reports a Yule feast²³⁵ organized by Gizurr. For this feast “*hann [Gizurr] hafði fjölmennit jólaboð ok bauð vinum sínum at inum átta degi. Þar var mjöðr blandinn ok mungát heitt.*”²³⁶ (he [Gizurr] invited many people to the Yule feast and invited his friends for the eighth day. There was *mjqðr* blending and *mungát* brewing [as part of the feast-preparations].) It seems that the news about large amounts of *mjqðr* and *mungát* at this feast travel fast, for when Órækja Snorrason asks for news about Gizurr “*Kollr sagði, at hann [Gizurr] hafði jafnan fjölmennit, ‘ok nú hefir hann at átta degi boðit til sín vinum sínum, ok var heitt í móti þeim mjöðr ok mungát.*”²³⁷ (Kollr said that he [Gizurr] often had a large company, ‘and now he has invited his friends for the eighth day, and *mjqðr* and *mungát* were brewed for all of them.’”) Here Kollr stresses the fact that there are going to be *mjqðr* and *mungát* at the feast, which seems to be a rather extraordinary fact, considering that *mjqðr* is rarely mentioned in the sources. If it was normal for men to offer these alcoholic drinks at feasts there would have been no need to stress the fact that they were promised to the guests. At yet another feast in *Íslendinga saga* we are told that “*var þar drukkit fast þegar um kveldit, bæði mjöðr ok mungát. Var þar in bezta veizla, er verit hefir á Íslandi í þann tíma. Hefir þat lengi kynrikt verit með Haukdælum ok Oddaverjum, at þeir hafa inar beztu veizlur haldit.*”²³⁸ (there was heavy drinking during the evening, both of *mjqðr* and *mungát*. That was the best feast that had been in Iceland in those times. It has long been the family tradition of the people of Haukdælir and Oddi that they had held the best feasts.) Once more, the mention of *mjqðr* and *mungát* seem to be connected with the fact that the feast is described as one of the best Icelandic feasts ever. The presence of large amounts of these beverages might not have

²³⁵ Seasonal feasts will be studied in Chapter 5.

²³⁶ *Ísl* CLIV, p. 458.

²³⁷ *Ísl* CLV, p. 459.

²³⁸ *Ísl* CLXX, p. 483.

been normal in Icelandic celebrations. After all, the families at Oddi and Haukdælir were among the richest families in Iceland at the time, and so they might have been among the few men who could afford to throw a feast with *mjqðr* for all the guests.

The last occurrence of *mjqðr* in the *Sturlunga saga* compilation sets it in a rather ordinary context. It takes place in *Guðmundar saga dýra*, where it is told that “*lengi hafið þér hlegit at því, at mér hafi þótt það gott ok ek hafa oft drukkit mikit. Nú mun kostur baðs, en ósýnt þykkir mér nú, hversu um mjöðdrykkjuna ferr.*”²³⁹ (long have you laughed at me because I had a good bath even though I had drunk much. Now I have the chance to take a bath, and I am now unsure whether I should drink *mjqðr*.) Here it appears just as a delicacy that someone enjoys before relaxing in a hot bath. However the reason for people’s laughter at this seems unclear.

In general, the *Sturlunga saga* compilation has more references to *mjqðr* than the *Íslendinga sqgur*. But here it appears mainly as a rare beverage that could only be enjoyed at feasts held by rich men.

The references to *mjqðr* in *Gqngu-Hrólf’s saga* are, perhaps, the most relevant within the *Fornaldar sqgur*. In it a group of Danes gets ready to sail back to Denmark after a journey to England. Their preparations as described as follows: “*Bjuggust þeir nú allir, þegar váraði, aftr til Danmerkr ok hlóðu skipin með malt, mjöð ok vin ok dýrum klæðum ok öllum þeim varningi, er dýrmætastr var í Danmörk ok fá kunni í Englandi, heldu síðan aftr til Danmerkr.*”²⁴⁰ (During the spring all of them got ready to sail to Denmark and loaded the ship with malt, *mjqðr* and *vin* and costly clothes and all those wares that are most expensive in Denmark and easy to get in England, then they got on their way to Denmark.) These wares are intended to be used to throw a pompous wedding feast²⁴¹ at which among such exotic dishes as pheasant or peacocks “*eigi*

²³⁹ *GuðDý* XIV, p. 190.

²⁴⁰ *GHR* XXXVII, p. 275.

²⁴¹ Wedding feasts will be studied in Chapter 5.

*vantaði þar inn dýrasta drykk, ál ok enskan mjöð með vildasta víni, píment ok klaret.*²⁴²
 (there was no lack of the most expensive drinks, *ql* and English *mjqðr* with the best *vin*,
 spiced and claret.) In this episode we can see what might have been a historical fact.
 That is, Norsemen travelling and bringing back with them the most expensive and rare
 delicacies they could find abroad. The malt that they bring back is most probably
 brewed and becomes the *ql* that is consumed at the feast. However the most expensive
 drinks, *mjqðr* and *vin* are imported as a finished product.

The rest of the references to *mjqðr* in the *Fornaldar sǫgur* basically mention its
 consumption. In *Vǫlsunga saga* we read that “*Grimhildr gefr honum [Sigurðr]
 meinblandinn*²⁴³ *mjöð, er öllum oss kemr í mikit stríð.*”²⁴⁴ (Grimhildr will give him
 [Sigurðr] *mjqðr* blended with malice, and a great grief will come to all of us.) This
 particular *mjqðr* is brewed in such a way that it will induce forgetfulness in Sigurðr.²⁴⁵
 A further reference to *mjqðr* in *Vǫlsunga saga* connects its consumption, or lack of
 consumption, with people’s mood. It reads: “*Þat geri ek eigi’ sagði hún, ‘at vekja hana
 né við hana mæla, ok mörg dægr drakk hún eigi mjöð né vín, ok hefir hún fengit goða
 reiði.*”²⁴⁶ (‘I will not do that,’ she said ‘to wake her up nor to talk with her, she has not
 drunk *mjqðr* nor *vin* for many days and she has got a godlike wrath.) Here *mjqðr* plays
 a symbolic role, where its consumption is a synonym of a joyful mood, while the lack of
 consumption is equated with grief. A fourth mention of *mjqðr* occurs in *Hervarar saga
 ok Heiðreks*. In it a person is invited to drink some at an *erfi* (funeral feast),²⁴⁷ but
 nothing else said in connection with the drink: “*þá mælti Angantýr: ‘Vel þú kominn,
 Hlöðr bróðir, gakk inn með oss til drykkju, ok drekkum mjöð eftir föður okkarn fyrst til*

²⁴² *GHr XXXVII*, p. 276.

²⁴³ *Meinblandinn* (blended with malice).- As mentioned above, blending *mjqðr* can refer to the act of
 brewing it. So this line may be translated as ‘blended with malice’ or ‘brewed with malice.’

²⁴⁴ *Vǫls XXV*, p. 172.

²⁴⁵ Magic drinks are discussed in Chapter 7.

²⁴⁶ *Vǫls XXIX*, p. 184.

²⁴⁷ Funeral feasts will be studied in Chapter 5.

sama ok öllum oss til vega með öllum várum sóma.”²⁴⁸ (then Angantýr said: ‘Welcome brother Hlǫðr; come inside with us to drink; and let us drink *mjqðr* in the memory of our father, first us together, and then all of us for glory in all our deeds.) The last occasion in which *mjqðr* is mentioned in the *Fornaldar sqgur* is that in *Bósa saga*. This occurrence seems to have also some sort of an emotive meaning, as it is mentioned in a simile by a maid. So, when the hero asks her what she thinks about the sexual intercourse that they just had she answers: “*svá dátt sem ek hefði drukkit ferskan mjöð*”²⁴⁹ (I am as charmed as if I just had drunk fresh *mjqðr*.)

In general the *Fornaldar sqgur* do not provide much information about *mjqðr*. Perhaps the only exception is that of *Gqngu-Hrólfis saga*, where the characters engage in a trading expedition to England in order to acquire goods that are too expensive in the homelands.

At the beginning of this section it was mentioned that *mjqðr* seems to be an archaic drink that belongs more to the realm of myth than to an everyday reality in medieval Scandinavia. The relative lack of historical and literary references supports this opinion. First of all, the law corpus does not pay much attention to *mjqðr* and honey trade. This makes me believe that the trade of these wares was not at such a large scale as was, for example, the trade of *ql*, *mungát* and malt. Second, the literary evidence also portrays *mjqðr* as a rare commodity in the North, and definitely it does not seem to have been such a common drink as maltose-based beverages were. *Mjqðr* seems to belong more to the realm of the symbolic and of myth, and for this reason I will study its role in the eddic sources and poetry in Chapter 3.

²⁴⁸ *Heiðr* XI, p. 55.

²⁴⁹ *Bós* XIII, p. 316.

2.4- FRUCTOSE –BASED DRINKS: *Vín*

“*Vín skal til vinar drekka*”²⁵⁰

For the purposes of this section, I will consider *vín* (wine) to be exclusively the fermented juice of the grape.²⁵¹ Being north of the ‘grape frontier’, neither Iceland nor Norway count *vín* among their native alcoholic drinks. The Old Norse term for wine, *vín*, is a loan-word from the Latin *vinum*,²⁵² and “*wohl zur idg. wurzel l. uei-, doch ist der idg. ursprung des wortes nicht unbestritten*”²⁵³ (probably from the Indo-Germanic root *l uei-*, but the Indo-Germanic origin is not indisputable). In any case, the etymologies of *vín* attest to it being a cultural import from the Continent. The wine consumed in these countries had to be imported as a finished product, unlike *qʀ* and *mungát* which were imported mainly in the form of the raw materials (cereal, hops and honey) required for their production. This probably resulted in *vín* becoming the most expensive of all the available alcoholic beverages, and thus the most prestigious of drinks in the North. In this section, I will analyze the historical sources attesting to the consumption of *vín* in chronological order, while the literary sources will be analyzed according to the internal chronology of the accounts rather than by the dates on which these accounts were written down.

As mentioned above, even in times of a more temperate climate, both Iceland and Norway were far north of the grape frontier. There have been some disagreements about how far north was it possible to grow vines; some scholars argue that they were not present in the area where the Saxon tribes, both English and continental, dwelled so

²⁵⁰ *StrIP II*, p. 234. “I shall toast my friends with wine.”

²⁵¹ We cannot discard the possibility that berry-wine was produced in Scandinavia; however, the sources do not back up this hypothesis. The possible use of berries in the production of alcoholic beverages will be discussed in the following section, devoted to alcoholic drinks of a mixed nature.

²⁵² See *IEW*, *vín* and *AEW*, *vín*.

²⁵³ *IEW*, *vín*.

that “wine was thus not a natural drink amongst the Germanic peoples.”²⁵⁴ To this argument James Graham-Campbell replies that

It is clear from Bede that Britain, as far back as the seventh century, was an island where wine grew in some districts. There are two vineyards referred to in tenth-century Anglo-Saxon charters (at Panborough and Watchet) and *Domesday Book* records their existence across much of southern England. Although some believe that most of the latter are to be associated with the new Norman overlords, it is clear that not all were newly planted.²⁵⁵

David Hill supports this theory and, based on an Anglo-Saxon manuscript illustration found in *The Old English Genesis* (BL MS Cotton Claudius B.iv, fo. 17r.) as well as on linguistic evidence, argues in favour of the cultivation of vines in Anglo-Saxon England.²⁵⁶ However, there has never been a debate about vine-growing in Scandinavia. The general agreement is that, due to weather and soil conditions (even before the Little Ice Age) grapes could never have grown in Norway or Iceland, at least not during the Holocene period.

Eiríks saga rauða and *Grönlendinga saga* are our only sources in which *vínviðr* (grapevines) and *vínber* (grapes) are mentioned – both in connection with the name of Vinland, whose etymology is highly debated.²⁵⁷ The account of the discovery of Vinland according to *Grönlendinga saga* shows that at least its author had no idea of how to transport grapes nor about the way in which *vín* was produced. The saga reports that among the first European explorers of America there was a man called Tyrkir, a *suðrmaðr* (southerner or German.²⁵⁸) One day it happened that Tyrkir was missing, and

²⁵⁴ Lowry, p. 8.

²⁵⁵ James Graham-Campbell, ‘On Anglo-Saxon Drinks’, *Medieval Life: A New Magazine of the Middle Ages* 2 (1995, sic. 1996), 32-33 (p. 33).

²⁵⁶ See David Hill, ‘Anglo-Saxon Mechanics: A Winepress’, *Medieval Life: The Magazine of the Middle Ages*, 6: Spring (1997) 7-10.

²⁵⁷ The etymology of Vinland is quite controversial as it is unclear if it should be spelled ‘Vinland’ or ‘Vínland’. For more information on this topic see Magnús Stefánsson, ‘Vinland or Vínland’, in *Vinland Revisited: The Norse World at the Turn of the First Millennium, Selected Papers from the Viking Millennium International Symposium, Sept 15-24 2000, Newfoundland and Labrador*, ed. by Shannon Lewis-Simpson (St. John’s N.L.: Historic Sites Association of Newfoundland and Labrador, Inc., 2003), pp. 319-30 and; Alan Crozier, ‘Arguments against the *Vinland Hypothesis’, in *Vinland Revisited*, ed. by Shannon Lewis-Simpson, pp. 331-40.

²⁵⁸ Even though *suðrmaðr* is often used to refer to Germans the noun *tyrkir* and name Tyrkir mean ‘Turkish’. The inclusion of a German in the account may have been a way of giving credibility to the

when he finally went back to the camp seemed to be quite cheerful. When the other men ask him where had he been

Hann talaði þá fyrst lengi á þýzku ok skaut marga vega augunum ok gretti sik, en þeir skildu eigi, hvat er hann sagði. Hann mælti þá á norrönu, er stund leið: 'Ek var genginn eigi miklu lengra en þit. Kann ek nökkur nýmæli at segja; ek fann vinvið ok vinber.' 'Mun þat satt, föstri minn?' kvað Leifr. 'At visu er þat satt', kvað hann, 'þvi at ek var þar foadr, er hvárki skorti vinvið né vinber.'²⁵⁹

(Then he first spoke for a long while in German and his eyes moved in all directions and had a wry face, and they understood nothing of what he was saying. After a while he then said in Norse: 'I did not go much further than you. I have some news to tell: I found grapevines and grapes.' 'Is that true, foster-father?' said Leif. 'I know it for sure' he said, 'because I was born where there is no lack of grapevines and grapes.')

The explanation for Tyrkir's strange behaviour must be in his account of the finding of grapes and grapevines. As Krappe argues, the actions of the southerner appear to be those of a drunken man, unable to make any sense and to control his gestures. The only possible source of this intoxication is the assumed consumption of grapes. If this was the case, then this episode would prove that "the sagaman was ignorant of the true nature of wine, the result of a fermentation process. On the part of the Icelanders and Greenlanders of that remote period such ignorance is excusable enough."²⁶⁰ The confusion of the episode's author, and perhaps also of many of his contemporary Icelanders, might have been due to the fact that the only thing he knew about the production of wine was that it was made out of grape-juice, believing then that the grapes were equally or even more intoxicating than the juice itself.²⁶¹

Also, in *Grönlendinga saga* there are two episodes in which different sets of explorers harvest and transport grapes back to Greenland. The first one occurs late in the summer, just after Tyrkir finds the grapevines. The morning after the episode related above Leifr Eiríksson proposes:

story, because wine was imported mostly from Germany, thus a German would be expected to be able to recognize grapes.

²⁵⁹ *Grøn* III, p. 252'

²⁶⁰ Alexander H. Krappe, 'Intoxicating Grapes', *Modern Language Notes*, 58:4 (1943), 268-74 (p. 270).

²⁶¹ For a possible Irish source of this episode see the *Immram curaig Maile Dúin* (*The Voyage of Máel Dúin's Boat*) chapter 29 and Krappe, p. 271.

‘Nú skal hafa tvennar sýslur fram, ok skal sinn dag hvárt, lesa vínber eða hqggva vínvið ok fella mqrkina, svá at þat verði farmr til skips míns.’ Ok þetta var ráðs tekit. Svá er sagt, at eptirbátr þeira var fylldr af vínberjum. Nú var hqggvinn farmr á skipit. Ok er várar, þá bjuggusk þeir ok sigldu burt.²⁶²

(‘From now on we will have two activities, and we will spend alternate days on each of them, either gathering grapes or cutting grapevines and felling trees so that they can be taken to my ship’ [The sense in this sentence seems to be that the grapevines are to be cut from the trees to be felled]. And this advice was agreed on. So it is said that their ship’s boat was full of grapes. Then the ship was loaded with the grapevines and fallen trees. And when the spring came they got ready and set the sail.)

Two years later a different crew arrives in Vínland and “*bjuggu þar þann vetr ok fengu sér vínber ok vínvið til skipsíns. Nú búask þeir þaðan um várit eptir til Grönlands ok kómu skipi sínu í Eiríksfjqrð.*”²⁶³ (lived there that winter and got grapes and grapevines to load the ship. And when the spring came they made ready to travel to Greenland and their ship arrived in Eiríksfjqrð.) In these passages, the author says that the grapes were cut down during the summer and stored, most likely in a pile inside the ship, through the winter. Now, this cargo in reality would have resulted at best in a load of rotten grapes with a few raisins on top. It should also be noted that grapevines are not trees as is implied in the text. These passages also reveal that the author was not aware of the nature and storage of grapes, as must have been the case with most of his contemporary countrymen. As a matter of fact grapes are extremely difficult to store and transport because they rot easily, and as a consequence most Icelanders would have never seen a grape in their lifetimes.

As mentioned above, both in Iceland as in Norway, wine had to be imported as a finished product. An entry in the late ninth-century *Sanas Chormaic* (*Cormac’s Glossary*) is perhaps the oldest written evidence of Norse wine-trade; specifically between the Norse and the Irish, who probably imported their wine from the Frankish Empire (and maybe even from southern England). In it, Cormac mac Cuilennáin (836-908 AD) defines *Epscop fina* as “a vessel for measuring wine among the merchants of

²⁶² *Grøn* III, pp. 252-53.

²⁶³ *Grøn* IV, p. 257.

the Norsemen and Franks.”²⁶⁴ *Epscop* may be closely related to the Old Norse words *askr* and *kaupa* (i.e. *askr-kaup*), the first element of the compound meaning “a Norse measure for liquids equal to four bowls or sixteen *jústur*”²⁶⁵ and the second element meaning ‘to buy, to trade’. *Fin* being the Old Irish word for wine (*vín* in Old Norse), we would have that *epscof fina* would be understood as ‘a measure for trading wine’ by the Norse who traded with the Irish.²⁶⁶

Vín was by far the most expensive drink in the Norse repertoire, displacing *mjqðr* from the high-prestige position it had during the pre-Christian period. Accordingly, in the Eddic poem *Grimnismál* Óðinn prefers to drink *vín* instead of his usual *mjqðr*; “*en við vín eitt vápnqfugr Óðinn æ lifir*”²⁶⁷ (but on wine alone, glorious in weapons, Óðinn lives), most surely because wine was a beverage more in accordance with his status. In the poem *Eiriksmál*, probably composed in the second half of the tenth century, wine seems to have already taken the place of *mjqðr* as the most prestigious drink at Valhǫll. In the poem, on occasion of King Eiríkr’s arrival in Valhǫll Óðinn commands: “*Valkyrjor vín bera, sem vísi komi.*”²⁶⁸ (Valkyries bear the wine as if a leader was coming.) *Vín* might also have become a prominent beverage due to its symbolism in the new faith, and having Óðinn as a *vín* drinker might have been a way of taming the god, of Christianizing him. As Richard Lowry puts it,

One may see a shift from pagan to a Christian sphere of values, including wine as the prestigious beverage. Wine would have functioned just as effectively as mead in this capacity for it, too, was expensive to produce and it had the added advantage of being exotic.²⁶⁹

But, exactly how expensive was a barrel of *vín*? A few Norwegian charters inform us about the price fluctuation between the late thirteenth and the early fifteenth

²⁶⁴ MacCuillennán, Cormac, *Sanas Chormaic: Cormac’s Glossary*, trans. by John O’Donovan (Calcutta: O. T. Cutter, The Irish Archaeological and Celtic Society, 1868), *Epscof fina*.

²⁶⁵ *IED*, *askr*. Unfortunately there is no clue to the volume contained by the *bolli*, *jústa* or *askr* measures.

²⁶⁶ Another possible etymology could be related from the Old Norse words ‘*askr*’ (‘ash’), ‘*koppr*’ (‘cup, small vessel’ and ‘*vín*’ (wine), i.e. an ash-cup for wine, though as the vessel is said to be meant for trade the first etymological approach seems to be more sound.

²⁶⁷ *Grm* 19.

²⁶⁸ *Eksm* 1.

²⁶⁹ Lowry, p. 8.

centuries. There are only three documents making reference to wine prices in Norway and Iceland. The earliest of these is a 1294 charter sent by the Norwegian king, Eiríkr II Magnússon, to a merchant in Bergen in order to remind him of a debt contracted with Arnold the wise (*Arnoldus sapiens*) and Reinward the white the white (*Raynardus albus*) for the purchase of 10 barrels of wine. In it the king tells the merchant “*Vos ab eisdem Bergis ad duos annos emistis decem dolea vini pro cxx marcis monete noricane et persoluistis eisdem xix marcas de predictis denariis, centum vero et vna marca adhuc remanent insolute.*”²⁷⁰ (Two years ago in Bergen you bought 10 barrels of wine for 120 marks, Norwegian currency, and the sellers received only 19 marks of the above-mentioned amount, leaving 101 marks pending.) Simple mathematics shows that the deal was struck at 12 Norwegian marks a barrel between the Bergen merchant and the probably (due to their names) English traders.

The second document to consider is a law passed by the Norwegian king Hákon Magnússon on May 29, 1306, setting the market price for wine and other imports. In this law he declares that “*alle haande win som inden þackmarckedt er kommen, skall dij lade indschrieffue paa kongsgaarden, hvad indt er förtt, oc þage orloff till at skiffue op, oc a þa konungen for hver fadt win 18: Engelsker, saa oc aff hver fadt ollie y toldt.*”²⁷¹ (All foreign wine that is brought to the city market they shall register at the king’s yard, what is brought in, and allow it to be written down, and pay the king for each barrel 18, English currency as a toll, the same for every barrel of oil.)

Wine was not only heavily taxed, but its price was also regulated by the Crown.

*Theft er forne winsetning ij Bergin, Stoeff Romennj for 16: Engelske, thed beste, oc mindre om der er lettere kiöb paa, ein stoup Asooie Bastartt eller Spansk win dett beste skall settiist for 12 Engelske, oc þui mindre at lettare sæe, Item ein stoup Rinsk win thed beste for 10: Engleske, oc þui mindre at lettare see, Item ein stoup Gaskonie Pöttow oc Gabinj, det bæste for 8: Engelske, oc þui mindre at lettare sæe.*²⁷²

²⁷⁰ DN V, p. 28.

²⁷¹ NGL IV, p. 361.

²⁷² NGL IV, p. 361. Approved on May 29, 1306. *Asoie Bastart* was a type of wine from Aix, in Burgundy; it refers to a wine that was either sweet or sweetened, or to a wine disguised with raisin juice. It is not certain where *Gabinj* was, but it might be a French region. See NGLGlos, *Asoie Bastart* and *Gabinj*.

It is an old wine-agreement [establishment] in Bergen; A large barrel of the best Roman [Italian?] wine is to be bought at 16, English currency, and less when it is lighter; a barrel of Aix Bastard or Spanish wine of the best quality shall be set at 12, English currency, and less when it is lighter; item a barrel of the best Rhenish wine for 10, English currency, and therefore less when it is lighter; item a barrel from Poitou in Gascony and from Gabinj of the best quality for 8, English currency, and therefore less when it is lighter.

The statute opens by stating that the wine-price is established according to the old set prices in Bergen, which may lead us to suspect that wine prices had not varied in a long period of time. Maybe then this law was passed to impose a new and, possibly, higher tax on the imports. There would have been no need to revise the law or to reaffirm it, unless foreign merchants were trying to alter the price of their merchandise or if an increased supply of wine reduced the prices so that the Crown had to interfere in order to control the trade as well as to protect its own economic interests. Such seems to have been the case when in the late twelfth-century Bergen had a wine surplus. *Sverris saga* reports that in 1186, after Easter

Þar var margt komit kaupmanna til bæjar, nær af ollum lqndum. Sudurmenn hqfðu flutt þangat win micith, suo at win war æigi dyrra en mungæt. Þat war eitt sinn, er menn sætu j windryckiu nqkurri, en þeir willdo læta taka meira winid; en sueinn Sudrmanna willdi æigi taka meira winid. Skilur þa æigi meira aa en wm einn winpott, ok þrættu þeir, til þers er Nordmen willdo ganga til ok briota wpp budina. En Sudrmenn woru fyrir jnnan ok lqgdu wth suerdum, ok særduzt menn af þui. Þui næst spurdizt þetta wm bæinn, ok hlupo til wopnna aller þydzskir menn ok suo bæiarmenn ok bqrduz; fellu margir menn ok flest af bæiarmqnum.²⁷³

(Many merchants, from nearly all lands, had come to the city. The Southern-men [Germans] had brought there a large amount of wine, so that wine was not more expensive than *mungát*. It happened on one occasion, when men sat at a certain wine tavern, that they wanted to have more wine brought to them and the lad working for the Southern-men did not want to bring them more wine. They discerned that there was just one wine-pot and they threatened that the North-men would go and break into the booth. And the Southern-men were inside and put out their swords and told them to get away. And after that they got on their feet and all the Germans went to arms and so did the town's people and several men fell dead, mostly on the side of the townsmen.)

In this passage we can see how the increase in volume of wine available leads to a reduction in its purchase price. The result of the price reduction (so that wine becomes cheaper than *mungát*) is that the German merchants refuse to continue selling their

²⁷³ Sv LXXII(CIII, CIV), 135.

wine. Perhaps one of the ways in which such price-fluctuation could have been controlled was by imposing heavier tolls on wine.

Going back to our 1306 statute, we can also perceive that since its prices are set in English currency it is also probable that the wine market at the beginning of the fourteenth century was controlled by English merchants. Also, since the tax-per-barrel was of 18 marks while the highest price per barrel was set at 16, one may assume that the toll was imposed on those buying the wine instead of those selling it; if not the English merchants, instead of making a profit, would end up losing up to 110% in each transaction. This would then mean that the market price for a barrel of wine, after taxation, would oscillate between 26 and 34 marks. If the prices for alcoholic beverages did not vary much then a law passed by Hákon Magnússon ten years later, on November 14, 1316, may give us a point to contrast the prices of wine and *bjórr*, as he declared that “*engin madr skal kaupa bior dyra en fyrir mork tunnuna. nema hver sem þat gerrir bæti konungi fim morkum silfrs ok se biorin uptækur*”²⁷⁴ (No man shall trade *bjórr* for more than a mark per barrel, and he who does it shall pay a fine of five marks of silver to the king and will have the *bjórr* confiscated.) This means that, before taxes, wine was up to sixteen times more expensive than Hanseatic *bjórr*!

The last document providing wine-prices is a charter dated 1420 in the Vestmannaeyjar, Iceland. It provides a price-list for trade between Icelandic and English merchants. According to it, one could acquire “*iiij tunnur biors firir hundrat*”²⁷⁵ (four barrels of *bjórr* for a hundred) while one would get “*tunna vins firir klent .c.*”²⁷⁶ (a barrel of *vin* for a clean hundred). In other words, one could acquire 4 barrels of *bjórr* for the price of a milch cow or two marks and a half (i.e. 570 gr.) of silver, while a single barrel of wine would cost four times as much (roughly 2.3 kg. of silver as pure as

²⁷⁴ NGL III, p. 124. The same price and penalty was established by the king one day later for *bjórr* trade in Tunsberg and Oslo, see *Kong Haakon Magnussöns Retterbod om Kjøbstevne i Byerne (Bergen, November 15, 1316)* in NGL III, p. 127.

²⁷⁵ DN XX, p. 28.

²⁷⁶ DN XX, p. 28.

that used to pay for the four barrels of *bjórr*). That is, a barrel of wine was 16 times more expensive than a barrel of *bjórr*. Considering that the average compensation paid for the death of a slave was 12oz. (340 gr.) of silver, and that paid for the killing of a freeman was 100 oz. (2.83 kg.) of silver, this nearly equates to a barrel of wine as the compensation for killing a freeman, or roughly one slave for a barrel of *bjórr*. Taking these prices into consideration it is easy to understand why, among the three pleasures to be enjoyed in an afterlife in Valhǫll, Snorri Sturluson pays a special attention in his *Edda* to an everlasting source of mead. Alcohol was a commodity worth dying for.²⁷⁷

Even though the previous charters provide the exact price per barrel of wine, one should be careful in drawing any conclusions from them, for we do not know if the quality of the wines or if the volume of the barrels was the same through the ages, not to mention special prices between friends or bad deals made by accident. Not even the currency is the same in these three documents, making it difficult to establish trends of price variation. All we can conclude from these charters is that by the beginning of the fourteenth century wine traffic seems to have been an English trade; they, for their part, acquired it from Italy, Spain, France and Germany.²⁷⁸

In spite of her commercial relationships with England, wine was not exactly abundant in Norway. After the Conversion, one of the most common uses for wine was for the celebration of the Christian Eucharist, but it seems that not all the parishes in the land had access to this product. Some priests had to resort to tricks in order to be able to perform their office. This particular situation can be attested in a letter sent by the Pope Gregory the IX to Sigurd, archbishop of Niðarós, in 1237. It reads:

Tue fraternitati querenti, an deficiente in quibusdam ecclesiis suffraganeorum tuorum eucharistia propter frumenti penuriam simplex oblata undecumque confecta populo, ut sub quadam decipiatur pietatis specie, ac cerevisia vel potus alius loco vini, cum vix aut nunquam vinum reperiatur in illis partibus, sint

²⁷⁷ As will be discussed in Chapter 6, the possession of alcohol, as a luxury item, became a tool by which men could display and/or increase their power.

²⁷⁸ There are several other laws dealing with wine sale in taverns, but these will be dealt with in Chapter 4.

*tradenda, taliter respondemus, quod neutrum est penitus faciendum, cum in huius modi sacramento visibilis panis de frumento et vini de uvis debeat esse forma in verbo creatoris per sacerdotis ministerium consecrata, quod veritatem carnis et sanguinis non est dubium continere, quamquam dari possit populo panis simpliciter benedictus, prout in quibusdam partibus fieri consuevit.*²⁷⁹

(Your brotherhood enquiring about the Eucharist being lacking in certain churches of your supporters due to the scarcity of grain [wheat] and therefore simple bread, made in any way, is given to the people; and about a certain deceiving of the faith under the appearance of piety, by which beer or even another drink might be [offered] in the place of wine since wine is hardly or never to be found in those regions, so we answer: that neither is properly done, since the sacrament ought to be made holy in the manner of visible bread of grain [wheat] and wine of grapes in which the word of God is consecrated through the office of the priest, because without doubt these sustain the true flesh and blood; nevertheless blessed bread might be able to be given to the people, just as in certain regions it has become customary.)

The lack of wine to celebrate the Eucharist in some Norwegian parish churches might not have been as bad as it was in Iceland. After all Norway is much closer to the Continent and had better commercial relationships than Iceland. Thus, we can well extrapolate this situation to Iceland. Unfortunately we lack documents that would help us clarify the situation there. The only information we have about wine for the Eucharist in Iceland comes from the Church Law in the Icelandic law handbook *Grágás*. Here it is stipulated that “*Ef þeir [the priests] vilja hafa vín og hveitimjöl, þá skal hver þeirra gjalda honum [the archbishop] þrjár álnir á tólf mánuðum.*”²⁸⁰ (if they [the priests] want to have wine and wheat meal, then each one of them shall pay him [the archbishop] three ells every twelve months.) The amount of wine involved in this transaction is not stipulated. However, what is relevant in this decree is the phrasing ‘*ef þeir vilja hafa vín*’ (‘if they want to have wine’). This would imply that it was not mandatory for the priests to have wine for the mass. Perhaps it was customary to substitute it with something else, like beer, as was the case in Norway. Or maybe they celebrated the Eucharist without wine or any other beverage at all. Modern historians specializing in the Icelandic Commonwealth period might be aware of the way in which Church funds

²⁷⁹ *DNI*, p. 14.

²⁸⁰ *Grg*, p. 18.

and administration were managed. During this period, parish churches were privately owned by *goðar* or *stórgoðar*, who tried to reap for themselves as much Church income as possible; sometimes even donating their properties to the churches that they owned, for Church properties were tax-exempt. Taking this into consideration, we can expect that most parish-church owners tried to save the large amounts of money involved in buying wine for the Eucharist.

Even if the references to wine are not abundant in the literary sources,²⁸¹ some of the historical facts about the wine trade are alluded to in them. The taxation imposed on wine and other imports as well as the expropriation laws for those who failed to declare their goods are clearly reflected in *Prestssaga Guðmundar Goða*, most probably written by the abbot Lambkárr Þorgilsson (d. 1249), a disciple and close friend of Guðmundr Arason himself.²⁸² The saga reports that in 1187 the priest Ingimundr returned to Norway after a trading expedition to England:

En um várit áðr þá hafði Ingimundr prestur farit vestr til Englands kaupferð ok kom vestan at hausti til Björgynjar. En er þeir koma af Englandi með mikil gæði vins ok hunangs, hveits ok klæða ok margrs annars, þá vilja menn Jóns kuflungs taka upp fyrir þeim ok ræna þá.²⁸³

(The previous spring Ingimundr the priest went to the west on a trading voyage to England, and in the autumn he came back from the west, to Bergen. When they arrived from England with plenty of good wine and honey, wheat and clothes and many other things, then the men of Jón kuflungr wanted to take the cargo and keep it.)

As we will see below, this action does not seem to be a mere act of piracy but an action taken by taxation officers to confiscate goods that were not declared. With such a valuable cargo being at stake, Ingimundr starts to use his connections and has one of his friends to talk with Jón kuflungr. After hearing the argument that previous kings allowed priests to freely bring wine into the country, Jón decides to let Ingimundr the

²⁸¹ Wine appears in 4 passages of the *Sturlunga saga* (*PrestGuð* XII, *ÞórðK* XLVIII, *ÞorSk* II and, *StrlÞ* II); in 2 passages of the *Íslendinga sǫgur* (*Eg* XVII and *Jǫkul* III) and; in 19 passages of the *Fornaldar sǫgur* (*Bós* XI and XIII; *GHr* XXXVII; *Heiðr* X; *HjQ* XII, XXI; *HG* XXIII; *Hrólfr* XXXIX; *Ragn* I; *SǫrlaSt* XXVI; *Vǫls* XX, XXI, XXIV, XXVII, XXIX, XXXV and, XXXVIII; *YngV* VII and; *ÞorstBm* II). In the *Poetic Edda* it is mentioned only in 6 instances (*Rþ* 32, *Grm* 19, *Sd* 17 and 29, and *Akv* 2 and 14).

²⁸² Peter Hallberg, 'Sturlunga Saga', in *Medieval Scandinavia*, ed. by Pulsiano, pp. 616-18 (*Sturlunga saga*).

²⁸³ *PrestGuð* XII, p. 136.

priest keep his property. When the news arrives to the ship, Jón's men gather all the goods onboard in order to declare them to the toll-agents:

*Þá gengu menn Jóns at átta vintunnum stórum, er kaupmenn áttu, ok spurðu, hverr ætti. En Ingimundr prestur kenndi sér fimm eða fjórar ok svá margt annat, þat er þeir spurðu eftir, þar til er þá grunaði, at hann myndi eigi svá auðigr maðr vera sem hann sagði, ok mæltu við hann: 'Nu sjáum vér, prestur, at þú munt kenna þér þat, er aðrir eigu, ok nenum vér eigi at missa alls.'*²⁸⁴

(Then Jón's men went to eight large barrels of wine which belonged to the merchants and asked who owned them. Ingimundr the priest claimed five or four of them and a similar proportion of the rest of the goods that they inspected. That went on until Jón's men suspected that he was not such a rich man as he claimed to be and then they said to him: 'Now we see, priest, that you want to claim for yourself that which belongs to others, and we do not intend to lose everything.)

Ingimundr, of course, does not own all the cargo he claims for himself. However he manages to keep part of these goods.

This episode may attest an expropriation court in Bergen, just like the ones mentioned in the law corpus. Jón kuflungr is not mentioned elsewhere in the *Sturlunga saga* compilation, but he has all the characteristics of a high-ranking toll collector, making decisions about tax exemptions from his *kontor* somewhere near the port. In this episode we can also see that lower-ranking officers kept part of the expropriated goods. What we do not know is if this appropriation on the part of the lower-ranking officers was legally established or if the saga is denouncing corruption in the lower spheres of the tax-office.

Wine trade in the Vestmannaeyjar is also attested in the *Sturlunga saga* compilation. In *Þórðar saga kakala* it is mentioned that in 1247 Svarthöfði travelled from Norway to the Vestmannaeyjar taking with him a wine cargo. Later in the summer Þórðr kakali went back to Iceland and "*kom Þórðr í Vestmannaeyjar. Tók hann þar vín mikit, er hann átti, en Svarthöfði hafði út flutt ok skilit þar eftir í eyjunum.*"²⁸⁵ (Þórðr arrived to the Vestmannaeyjar. There he took a large amount of wine which he owned and which Svarthöfði had imported and left for him in the islands.) This literary

²⁸⁴ *PrestGuð* XII, p. 137.

²⁸⁵ *ÞórðK* XLVIII, p. 84.

reference to wine import in the Vestmannaeyjar is in agreement with the historical sources for, as we have seen, the only source regulating wine-prices in Iceland was redacted in that same location.

The mid thirteenth-century *Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar* is the only *Íslendinga saga* that makes reference to wine trade between England and Norway. In it Þórólfr Kveld-Úlfsson, paternal uncle of Egill, goes on a trading voyage to England some time in the late ninth century. The expedition “*kómu fram á Englandi, fengu þar góða kaupstefnu, hlóðu skipit med hveti ok hunangi, víni ok klæðum, ok heldu aptr um haustit; þeim byrjaði vel, kómu at Hqrðalandi.*”²⁸⁶ (landed in England; there they had plenty of trading. They loaded the ship with wheat and honey, wine and cloth; and in the autumn they went back. They got a fair wind and arrived at Hqrðaland.)

Most of the remaining references to wine belong to the realm of the fantastic, which is not strange as, with the exception of the one in *Jqkuls þátrr Búasonar*, they form part of the *Fornaldar sqgur*.²⁸⁷ Due to the proportion of wine references in our sources (4 times in the *Sturlunga saga*, 3 in the *Íslendinga sqgur* and 19 in the *Fornaldar sqgur*) it seems that wine, as an exotic drink, belongs both to the glorious legendary past and the realm of myth. Considering wine-prices after taxes in the fourteenth century this does not come as shocking news. Maybe saga authors idealized a remote past in which wine was, if not abundant, at least a commodity one could access more easily than in the expensive present. This disproportion in the references to wine in the internal literary chronology might have been a way of exalting the legendary heroes, a way of showing their high status by having them drinking the most expensive of beverages.

The remaining reference to wine in the *Íslendinga sqgur* bears more resemblance to an episode of a *Fornaldar saga* than to the *Íslendinga sqgur*. This

²⁸⁶ *Eg XVII*, p. 42.

²⁸⁷ References to wine in the Eddic corpus will be studied in Chapter 3.

occurs in *Jqkuls þáttur Búasonar*, where, after killing several ferocious *Jqtnar* in *Jqtunheim* in order to rescue a Saracen princess and her brother, the hero “*eptir það leysti hann þau og gaf þeim vín að drekka.*”²⁸⁸ (after that he untied them and gave them wine to drink.) The presence of wine might be explained due to the fact that the *Jqtnar* were holding a feast²⁸⁹ and *Jqkull*’s deed may have been possible due to the fact that the *Jqtnar* are said to be very drunk when they are attacked. However, in the text the *Jqtnar* are said to be consuming *ql* and not *vín* at the feast.²⁹⁰ This might be due to the fact that literary wine may have been reserved for the most valiant heroes and not for savage creatures, such as the *Jqtnar*, even if they own it.

As previously mentioned, wine is a drink that seems to belong to the mythical realm of the *Fornaldar sqgur*, the genre in which it is mentioned more often. Among these, *Vqlsunga saga* is the one in which it appears more often (7 occurrences). In this group of sagas, the consumption of wine is limited to basically two different settings²⁹¹: the halls of kings and supernatural places. Let us analyze the supernatural episodes first.

In *Þorsteins þáttur bojarmagns*, the hero visits an *undirheim* (an underground dwelling) where a royal elfish feast is being held presumably to welcome an emissary that has just arrived from India. At this feast, he can see that “*var þar af engu drukkit utan af silfrkerum. Trapiza stóð á gólfi. Allt sýndist þeim þar gulligt ok ekki drukkit nema vín.*”²⁹² (there they drunk out of silver goblets. A table stood there over the floor. Everything there seemed to be golden and nothing but wine was drunk.) This otherworldly wine-drinking is set here in an atmosphere befitting the status of wine: a court in a golden room, drinking the most expensive of beverages out of the finest drinking vessels.²⁹³ The fact that the guests drink nothing but wine might be intended to

²⁸⁸ *Jqkul* III, p. 57.

²⁸⁹ The connection between *Jqtnar* and alcoholic beverages will be studied in Chapter 3.

²⁹⁰ *Jqkul* III, p. 55.

²⁹¹ With the exception of *Bósa saga*, as we will see.

²⁹² *ÞorstBm* II, p. 322.

²⁹³ Drinking vessels will be studied in Chapter 6.

stress the magnificence of the scene. In contrast, *Hrólfs saga kraka* offers a scene in which king Hrólfr and his champions find themselves drinking wine at the cottage of a poor farmer called Hrani. There, in the middle of the night, the heat is so unbearable that they “*vöknuðu við þat, at þorsti var svá mikill kominn á þá, at þeim þótti náliga óbæriligr, svá [...] þeir stóðu upp ok fóru þangat til, sem skaptker eitt stóð með vín, ok drukku þar úr.*”²⁹⁴ (woke up because of that, for the thirst was so great that they thought it was nearly unbearable, so [...] they stood up and went thither where a large vessel with wine stood, and drank from it.) The presence of such a large amount of wine in the house of a poor farmer seems improbable. However later in the saga we find out that Hrani the farmer was none other than Óðinn in disguise, justifying, thus, the large amounts of wine.²⁹⁵

Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar presents yet another uncanny episode involving wine and the only episode of animal-drunkenness in the Old Norse corpus. This scene takes place in England, under the rule of King Ella who owns a lion so ferocious that it would spare no one’s life. When King Hrólfr Gautreksson approaches the court of Ella, the lion’s guardians decide to play a trick on Hrólfr: “*þeir höfðu áðr dýrit ært með víni ok alls kyns drykk inum sterkasta*”²⁹⁶ (they had already maddened the animal with wine and all kinds of strong drinks) so that the lion rampages through the forest. When the troops of King Hrólfr encounter the lion, they find that “*leó sýnir mátt sinn ok kastar hala sínum í hring um eikrnar ok kippir svá upp með rótum. Síðan grípr hann með klónum ok kastar í loft upp, sem þá er kōttr leikr at fuglum.*”²⁹⁷ (the lion tests his strength and twists its tail around oak-trees and pulls them up including the roots. Then he grips the trunks with its claws and throws them up in the air, like a cat playing with birds.) When Hrólfr sees this he provides what for him is the most logical explanations for the lion’s

²⁹⁴ *Hrólfr* XXXIX, p. 75-76.

²⁹⁵ As we have already seen, *vín* is Óðinn’s sole nourishment according to *Grm* 19.

²⁹⁶ *HG* XXIII, p. 136.

²⁹⁷ *HG* XXIII, p. 137.

strange behaviour “*þat mundi ært vera áðr af drykk.*”²⁹⁸ (it must have been previously maddened with drink.)

Wine could also be used as a metaphor for the female genitalia, as is the case in *Bósa saga*, when Bósi asks for the sexual favours of a farmer’s daughter by using the following ‘pick-up line’: “*Ek vil brynna fola mínum í vinkeldu þinni*”²⁹⁹ (I want to water my colt in your wine source) and explaining to her in which part of his anatomy his colt might be found: “*Hvar er folinn þinn, hjartavinrinn minn?*” sagði hún. ‘*A millum fóta mér, ástin mín*’ kvað hann.”³⁰⁰ (‘Where is your colt, friend of my heart?’ she said. ‘It is between my legs, my love’ he said.)

Wine appears as a rather exotic drink, and the authors do not show much familiarity with it. The drink is then portrayed in rather bizarre contexts, let them be mythic realms or used to induce animal drunkenness.

Wine consumption at kings’ halls is, on the contrary, surrounded by an aura of sumptuousness and done in a luxurious context. Here wine is actually depicted as a high status beverage to be served in abundance. For example, at the court of King Buðli “*Hann [Sigurðr] sezt hjá henni [Brynhildr]. Síðan ganga þar inn fjórar konur með stórum borðkerum af gulli ok með inu bezta víni ok standa fyrir þeim.*”³⁰¹ (He [Sigurðr] sat next to her [Brynhildr]. Then four women went in carrying large golden table-goblets and the best wine and stood in front of them.) Here wine is served in costly vessels and served in an almost ritual way by four maidens whose sole role is to pour wine. At the same court “*Brynhildr ok Gunnarr sátu við skemmtan ok drukku gott vín.*”³⁰² (Brynhildr and Gunnarr sat together at the entertainment and drank good wine.) And at King Atli’s court Gunnarr commands “*statt upp ok gef oss at drekka af stórum*

²⁹⁸ *HG* XXIII, p. 137.

²⁹⁹ *Bós* XI, p. 308.

³⁰⁰ *Bós* XI, p. 308.

³⁰¹ *Vqls* XXIV, p. 167.

³⁰² *Vqls* XXVII, p. 178.

*kerum gott vín, því at vera má, at sjá sé vár in síðasta veisla.*³⁰³ (stand up and give us good wine to drink in large goblets, because it may be that this is our last feast.) Wine seems to be accompanied by the adjective *góðr* (good)³⁰⁴ and served in large amounts. Taking into consideration wine-prices, wine abundance was used as a symbol of opulence. A final courtly scene involving wine is that of *Sqrla saga sterka* where, “*En sem drottning sá hann, rénaði henni öll reiði ok varð með öllu orðfall. Síðan sætti Högni Sörla við drottningu, systur sína, ok var nú drukkit lystugt vín ok leikar framðir með kurt.*”³⁰⁵ (and when the queen saw him she had a fit of anger and became completely silent. Then Hogni sat Sqrla next to his sister the queen, and now a delightful wine was drunk and they proceeded courteously.)

These courtly scenes involving wine are presented in a glamorous way, with wine-bearers and golden goblets, seats being assigned and people interacting with courtesy. It seems that the authors use wine as a symbol to enhance the status of the courts they are describing. Wine is mentioned in order to make these courts appear refined and wealthy.

There are just a few Icelandic charters attesting to the wine situation in the country. Most of them concern church figures, for example, in a charter dated 1277, in Skállhólt, it is stated “*at herra biskup þacade honum vinsamlig ord oc presentr. er konungr hafði sendt honum. tunnu vins til □essosaungs. oc pund vax. oc pund flurs.*”³⁰⁶ (that the bishop thanks him for the friendly words and the present which the king has sent him [of a] barrel of wine for the mass and a pound of wax and a pound of flour”). The wine and flour might have been intended for the Eucharist. In another charter, dated

³⁰³ *Vqls* XXXV, p. 203.

³⁰⁴ As we will see in Chapter 3, *mjqðr* also tends to be accompanied by several standard adjectives. However, while this seems to be regular in the case of *mjqðr*, *vín* is not regularly accompanied by an adjective. In any instance, this may be due to the fact that *vín* replaced *mjqðr* as the prestigious beverage and perhaps some of the conventions in the naming of *mjqðr* might have been also transferred to wine.

³⁰⁵ *SqrlaSt* XXVI, p. 409.

³⁰⁶ *DI* II, p. 159. *DI* III, p. 130 records a similar gift of wine and flour. Most other references to wine in the *DI* only list wine as part of the equipment that the priest should take to mass. See for example *DI* III, p. 130.

1279, King Magnús send two barrels of wine to Bishop Árni Þorlaksson.³⁰⁷ The reason for these wine-gifts to the Skállhólt bishopric are explained in a letter from King Henry to the bishop, in it, the king states: “*qui in episcopum de Scalhelte in Islandia nuper es creatus, panem, vinum, servisiam, neque alium liqvorem, nisi lac et aquam*”³⁰⁸ (that in the bishopric of Skállhólt in Iceland nothing is grown, bread nor wine, nor beer or any other liquor, except milk and water) and so he sends two ships loaded with these goods so that they can be used for the mass. Skállhólt seem to have been the place where most wine-gifts were sent, and from there it was distributed to other parish churches in the land. That would explain a charter stating that “*Jtem ath einginn prestur taki vin edr hueite annars stadar enn j skalholhti [...] oc giallde [v. aura eyre [v. aura j vintoll til skalholhts arlegha.*”³⁰⁹ (item, that no priest takes wine or wheat from other place than Skállhólt [...] and pays 5 aurar as wine-toll to Skállhólt every year).

In spite of all these gifts, wine seems to have been scarce, so that it had to be carefully rationed. So, in a charter written ca. 1323-28 it is stated that: “*Bydz ok hçfudprestum sub pena suspensiones officij et beneficij. at þeir syngi sealfir messur) [...] sealfir prestr sa er messo syngr blandi [uatni uid uin) i kaleck. en æigi klerkr. sua at meira se af [uatni enn uini i kaleck). [sva at vatn riki yfir uini[n]u.*”³¹⁰ ([we] order also that all the priests, under the penalty of suspension from the office, that only them sing mass [and that] only the priest that sings mass blends water with wine in the chalice, and not the clerk, so that there is more water than wine in the chalice [so that water is more abundant than wine). Perhaps, at some point in history some other church officers were in charge of bending the wine in the chalice, and the wine was not very diluted. This might have been used as an excuse for the laity, or other church officers, to have at least a taste of the gift of kings – wine – at least every time that the Eucharist was

³⁰⁷ DI II, p. 161.

³⁰⁸ DI IV, p. 606.

³⁰⁹ DI IV, p. 588.

³¹⁰ DI II, p. 536.

celebrated. This practice might have proven quite expensive to the Church, hence the stress on the fact that the concentration of water should be higher than that of wine. Yet, wine was not always present at mass, not even diluted. A charter dated 1375, begins with the words “*Af þui ath vijn hefir ecki et cetera*”³¹¹ (because we have no wine *et cetera*) instructs the priests to continue with the celebration of mass every Sunday.

As we could see in the previous pages, wine was not a very common beverage in Scandinavia. Just like *mjqðr*, it was a rather expensive drink, albeit easier to obtain than *mjqðr*. The historical sources confirm that wine was imported in large amounts in Norway, although at a rather high price. Wine seems to have been less common in Iceland than in Norway, and perhaps its price was much higher in this North Atlantic island than in Norway - where it was imported from Germany and England. Wine availability, even if at a high price (compared with the apparent unavailability of *mjqðr* and its also high prices) might have turned it into the most prestigious of beverages to be found in the North. The almost complete lack of references to wine in the *Diplomatarium Islandicum* attests to the unavailability of this beverage in Iceland. When this drink is mentioned in the Icelandic charters it is, mostly, to make reference to its absence. Perhaps also due to its high value it became the preferred beverage of Óðinn and perhaps also the ideal drink to be consumed by prestigious guests at Valhǫll. Wine's price may have also have played a role in the fact that it is more commonly found in the legendary sagas than in the pseudo-historical *Íslendinga sqgur* and *Sturlunga saga*. Its price and rarity may have led also to the conception of a mythic Vínland, where wine grew wild and was free to take.

³¹¹ *DI III*, p. 307.

2.5-DRINKS WITH MIXED SUCROSE CONTENT: *BJÓRR*

In his study on the bog people and the funeral practices during the Early Iron Age, P. V. Glob discusses the food and drink remains found in several burials. When discussing the remains of the ca. 2500 year-old Tollund Man, discovered in Denmark in 1950, he comments that

there was an alcoholic drink in the Iron Age, as has been revealed by the analysis of sediments in bronze vessels of the period. It was half way between beer and fruit wine. Barley and the wild plants cranberry and bog myrtle were used in its manufacture. The alcoholic content may have been increased by the addition of honey.³¹²

He notes that this agrees with Tacitus' (born ca. 56 AD) description of the Germans, who "as a drink [...] use the sap from barley or wheat, fermented into something like wine."³¹³ Hornsey reports that the dregs of a beverage similar to that described by Glob were recovered from a bronze bowl found at the grave of an Iron-Age woman in the Island of Lolland, in Denmark; and that the dregs in a container in a Bronze Age oak-coffin burial at Egtved, East Jutland, proved to be of exactly the same nature.³¹⁴ The components of the drink were

1. - Honey, as indicated by the pollen of lime [...]; 2. - Fruits and leaves used respectively as a source of sugar, and for flavouring. The fruits were identified as being as being from either *Vaccinium oxycoccus* L. (cranberry), or *V. vitis-idaea* (cowberry), and the leaves were those of sweet gale (*Myrica gale* L.). 3. - Cereal grains (identified as wheat).³¹⁵

More than a thousand years separate the periods in which these beverages were deposited and that of our research. Yet many questions spring from these discoveries. Taking into account that remains of two almost identical beverages were recovered from Bronze and Iron Age burials one wonders if there was continuity in the tradition of brewing similar mixed beverages into the Viking and/or Scandinavian Middle Ages. If there was a certain degree of continuity, then, in the case of its occurring in the

³¹² P.V. Glob, *The Bog People: Iron-Age Man Preserved*, trans by Rupert Bruce-Mitford (Edinburgh: the author, 1965; repr. Edinburgh: Paladin, 1971), p. 31.

³¹³ Cornelius Tacitus, p. 86.

³¹⁴ Hornsey, p. 219.

³¹⁵ Hornsey, p. 219.

written records, what was this drink called? Also, due to the apparent lack of dregs dating to our main periods of research, are there any other archaeological remains that may point to the existence of mixed beverages with a higher alcohol volume than those made only out of cereals or fruits?

As I will discuss in the following pages, it seems that this kind of mixed beverage was called *bjórr*. The study of this beverage is not unproblematic, due to several circumstances. First of all it is not widely mentioned in the saga corpus, as it appears only in the *Sturlunga saga* compilation;³¹⁶ and when it comes to the *Poetic Edda* it is mentioned on 9 occasions,³¹⁷ but none of these are very informative about the nature of the drink. The second problem one confronts is that the best evidence to understand the nature of this drink comes from Anglo-Saxon sources, but in order to have some certainty about the validity of the results one would need to accept that Old English *beor* is equivalent to Old Norse *bjórr*. Even if these words are cognates one cannot take for granted that they actually referred to the same type of beverage. The third problem is that *bjórr* seems to have shifted its meaning at some point in the thirteenth century so that it became equivalent with Old High Germanic *bior*. As we will see, *bior* seems to be equivalent (but not cognate) to Old Norse *ql* or *mungát*. This change in meaning might have been the result of German linguistic influence due to the intense Hanseatic trade of *ql* and *mungát*. This fact means that one has to approach the historical sources with extra care, as their use of *bjórr* might actually refer to *ql*. Let us start our analysis with the few certainties that we have about this drink.

As mentioned above, Old Norse *bjórr* seems to have had a change of meaning. The oldest written attempt to explain of what *bjórr* is occurs in the manuscript GKS 1812 4to (written c.1192 and now at the Stofnun Arna Magnússonar, in Reykjavík)

³¹⁶ *Ísl* CL, p. 453 and *ÞórðK* XXXVIII, p. 70.

³¹⁷ *Alv* 34, *Vkv* 28, *Gðr II* 23, *Akv* 1 and 15, *HH* 17, *Sd* 5, *Hdl* 33 and *Vsp* 37.

where *bjórr* is glossed in Latin as *mulsum*³¹⁸ (i.e. mead) which may be just an attempt at a definition by making reference to a beverage similar to *bjórr*. From this gloss it is possible to infer that the drink was sweet and that honey was probably one of its ingredients (perhaps used to add flavour as well as to increase the alcohol content), hence the association of *bjórr* with mead. However, roughly 150 years later, in a testament dated March 13, 1355 (in Stavanger, Norway) we get to know that the priest and deacon of Stavanger inherited from Þorgeir Berderson “*tunnu biors eðr tunnu med humla mungaát en bioren er ei till*”.³¹⁹ (a barrel of *bjórr* or a barrel of hopped *mungát* if there is no more *bjórr*.) In this last source the distinction between *mungát* and *bjórr* seems to imply that *bjórr* is a malt-derived drink that can be substituted by hopped *mungát*. This is very close to the modern distinction between ale and beer, which became current since “a number of writers from the sixteenth century onwards have drawn a technical distinction between ‘ale’ and ‘beer’, reserving the word ‘beer’ for a malt-based liquor to which hops have been added, and using the word ‘ale’ of the unhopped variety.”³²⁰ However, the possibility exists that *mungát* was actually a drink of a mixed nature, for as we have already seen, it was defined as a strong kind of *ql*. Thus, the alcoholic content of *ql* might have been enhanced by the addition of honey.

Unfortunately these two ‘definitions’ of *bjórr* are all we have left to understand what *bjórr* was made out of. A number of charters and laws from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries seem to equate it with beer (hopped ale), but as we will see below, this might well be due to a change of meaning that developed once the Hanseatic League took over the trade of *ql* in the area, importing with it the name they used for hopped ale in Old High Germanic: *pior* or *bior*. This of course does not imply that Old Norse *bjórr* was originally a loan word. As a matter of fact, “the origin of the [Old

³¹⁸ ONP, *bjórr*.

³¹⁹ DN IV, p. 298.

³²⁰ Fell, p. 76.

English] word *beor* [and the Old Norse word *bjórr*] is obscure. It has cognates in all the West Germanic languages, but not in Gothic, not even Crimean Gothic.”³²¹

The Old Norse word *bjórr* has disappeared from modern Scandinavian languages.³²² It is only present in the Modern Swedish *bira*, used to refer to both beer and ale, though it is rarely used, as the everyday word for these beverages, just as in other modern Scandinavian languages, is *øl* or *öl* (derived from the Old Norse *ql*). At first glance it is tempting to equate *bjórr* with Modern English *beer* and Modern German *Bier*, however, one must first consider the scant and fragmentary evidence that we have about this beverage. *IED* suggests that *bjórr* is “no doubt a word of German extraction, *öl* (*öldr*), ale, being the familiar word used in prose [...] *bjór* however is very current in poetry”³²³, implying that the authors have equated *bjórr* and *ql*, the only difference being that the former is the poetical expression of the later. *ONP* tells us that *bjórr* is a “strong alcoholic beverage (prob. based on honey, more highly valued than *mungát*; quotations from *Sturlunga saga* and *Sverris saga* suggest an imported product).”³²⁴ *IEW* mentions that the word *bjórr* is “*besonders von ausländischem bier gebraucht [...] wahrscheinlich aus ae. beor* (engl. beer) [...] *Zugrunde liegt wohl klosterlat. biber ‘getränk’, zu. lat. bibere ‘trinken’. [or] von germ *beura-, zu bewwu- ‘gerste, korn’*”³²⁵. (especially used for foreign beer [...] probably from Old English *beor* (English ‘beer’) [...]) The root is probably the monastic Latin *biber* ‘to drink’ from the Latin *bibere* ‘drink’ [or] from the Germanic **beura, bewwu* ‘barley, corn’). *AEW* coincides with this last point in the *IEW* and also explains *bjórr* as deriving from *bewwu*.³²⁶ However, as mentioned above, it seems that all definitions are correct as Old Norse *bjórr* shifted its meaning once the Hanseatic League started taking over the *ql*

³²¹ Fell, p. 77.

³²² See *IEW*, *bjórr* and *AEW*, *bjórr*.

³²³ *IED*, *bjórr*.

³²⁴ *ONP*, *bjórr*.

³²⁵ *IEW*, *bjórr*.

³²⁶ *AEW*, *bjórr*.

trade in Norway and ‘*pior*’ or ‘*bior*’, the Old High German word for *ql*, displaced the earlier meaning of Old Norse *bjórr*.

Assuming that the hypothesis of a shift in the meaning of *bjórr* is correct, one then needs to approach the study of both meanings of *bjórr* by analyzing separately its two different semantic stages. The oldest meaning of *bjórr*, which most probably denoted a fruit or berry based drink strengthened with honey, will be referred to as ‘Nordic *bjórr*’ whereas the later meaning, by which *bjórr* referred to hopped *ql*, will be referred to as ‘Hanseatic *bjórr*’.

Nordic *Bjórr*

Bjórr seems to be an indigenous word of the Old Norse vocabulary and, in case it happens to be a loanword from German extraction as *IED* suggests, we can be sure that it was in use long before trade with Germany reached its boom with the Hanseatic League. The word, though it was infrequent before the thirteenth century, was already in use at least by the mid tenth century. In the *eddic* poem *Eiríksmal* it is said to be drunk in Valhǫll, as Óðin orders his einherjar to wash the *bjórr*-vats, “*biór-ker at leyðra*”³²⁷. Around 985 AD Eyvindr Finnsson skáldaspillir used it in his poem *Háleygjatal* in a kenning for blood “*hróka-biór*”³²⁸ (ravens’ *bjórr*). *Bjórr* also appears in a few of the *eddic* poems contained in the thirteenth-century Codex Regius of the *Poetic Edda*. Two of these poems mentioning *bjórr*, *Vǫlundarkviða* and *Atlakviða*³²⁹, have been stylistically dated to the ninth century. In *Vǫlundarkviða* it is used to get a maiden drunk in order to rape her “*bar hann hana bióri, þvíat hann betr kunni*”³³⁰ (He

³²⁷ *Eksm* 1. This passage possibly equates *bjórr* with *mjqðr* due to the fact that *mjqðr* is the beverage most commonly associated with Valhǫll, but the drinking vessels to be prepared are supposed to contain *bjórr* instead. This reference and probable equation of both drinks is uncertain, as the inclusion of *bjórr* in the poem might have been due to stylistical requirements rather than to the similarity between drinks.

³²⁸ *Háleygjatal* is preserved fragmentarily as part of *Skspm*. See *Skspm* 2, p. 7.

³²⁹ For the dating of these poems see Paul Beekman Taylor, ‘*Vǫlundarkviða*’, in *Medieval Scandinavia*, ed. by Pulsiano, pp. 711-12 and; R.G. Finch, ‘*Atlakviða*’, in *Medieval Scandinavia*, ed. by Pulsiano, pp. 23.

³³⁰ *Vkv* 28.

overcame her with *bjórr*, because he was more knowing than her) while in *Atlakviða* Guðrún seems to be highly aware of treason³³¹ precisely because “*bjóri var hon lítt drukkin*.”³³² (she had drunk little *bjórr*.) In this same poem *bjórr* is mentioned as a delightful or sweet drink “*bjóri svásum*”.³³³

These five occurrences are the oldest sources for the use of Old Norse ‘*bjórr*’, as it does not survive in any runic inscriptions. From them we can infer that as early as the ninth or tenth century a beverage called *bjórr* was known in the Norse world. This beverage, in short, was: a) drunk in Valhǫll; b) used in kennings for blood; c) probably highly intoxicating and; d) sweet or pleasurable to drink. Before continuing with the analysis, it is necessary to make a pause in order to look for more evidence, outside the Nordic countries, of drinks that may be related to Nordic *bjórr*.

Nordic *bjórr* seems to have its closest relative in the Anglo-Saxon *beor*, which is glossed in several Old English manuscripts as ‘*mulsum*’ or ‘*ydromelum*’³³⁴, just as is the case in the late 12th century Old Norse GKS1812 4to manuscript, where ‘*bjórr*’ is glossed as ‘*mulsum*’. In 1974 H. E. Kylvstra brought forward the hypothesis that Old English *beor* was indeed something different from beer and ale. Kylvstra reached this conclusion based on Old English glosses for the Latin *ydromelum* as being ‘*beor vel ofetes wos*’ and ‘*idromelum*’ being ‘*æppelwin, beor*’.³³⁵ (apple-wine, *beor*).³³⁶ Taking these glosses into account Kylvstra concluded that in Anglo-Saxon England *beor* “was a hydromel or aqueous mead, about the manner of fermentation, etc., of which, however, nothing whatsoever is known.”³³⁷ The only certainty concerning *beor* is that “when *beor* occurs in OE we have no data whatever in support of the translation ‘beer’.” It would be

³³¹ Drunkenness in connection with power and treason will be studied in Chapter 6.

³³² *Akv* 15.

³³³ *Akv* 1: “delightful *bjórr*” or “sweet *bjórr*”.

³³⁴ See Kylvstra; Fell; Griffiths and; Hornsey.

³³⁵ Kylvstra, p. 9.

³³⁶ The gloss of *beor* as *æppelwin* might have some French influence as there is “a northern french drink called *bère*, which is a Norman word still used as a dialect word to signify ‘cider’. *Bère*, by definition, describes a fermented drink which is made solely from the juice of apples.” Hornsey, p. 256.

³³⁷ Kylvstra, p. 9.

also illogical to equate *beor* with *mulsum* or *ydromellum* based on the Old English glosses just as it would be illogical to equate *bjórr* with *mulsum* based on the gloss in Ms GKS1812 4to. As Bill Griffiths argues, “translations [...] may be influenced by other considerations [...] that affect the choice of equivalent; information may be insufficient to give an accurate meaning; exact equivalence between drinks of different nations or times may not be possible.”³³⁸

Based on the glosses and the information that we have at hand it may be impossible to find out what *bjórr*'s ingredients were. If, based on the reference to sweetness in the glosses for both *beor* and *bjórr*, we can consider them to be similar types of drinks, then the only conclusion we can extract is that it was some sort of brew or wine fortified with honey. “To have honey as one ingredient does not at all exclude the presence of malt or even hops as other ingredients”³³⁹ nor does it exclude the possibility that it was some sort of berry wine fortified with honey, as was the case with the dregs found in the remains of the Tollund man or at the Egtved burial. Perhaps it was a beverage such as *bragget*, which “in the later Middle Ages [referred to] ale with added honey, and spices.”³⁴⁰ It seems that “the drink in question [*beor*] was a honey-sweetened fermented juice”³⁴¹ but honey may not have been its only ingredient, otherwise it would have been called *mjqðr* or *meðu*. A definition that has not been proposed yet is that *bjórr* refers to a ‘pure’ fermented drink made out of fruits or berries - other than grapes - a fact that would justify the sweet flavour mentioned in the glosses.

Hanseatic *bjórr*

³³⁸ Griffiths, p. 233.

³³⁹ Griffiths, p. 234.

³⁴⁰ Hagen, *Second Handbook*, 234.

³⁴¹ Graham-Campbell, p. 32.

As mentioned above, after the advent of the Hanseatic League and its hegemony over *ql* trade in the North Old High German *bior* seems to have taken over the meaning of Northern Germanic *bjórr*. Kylstra advances the hypothesis that

In Scandinavia, the imported beer of Hanseatic origins comes to be distinguished as *bjórr* from the traditionally indigenous *ql*. [...] In the early language, and in Old Norse generally, it occurs much more rarely than *ql*, and this word in time asserted itself as the generic term for fermented malt-liquors and the normal Scandinavian word for 'beer'.³⁴²

Perhaps the best evidence for this shift in meaning can be perceived in price-lists. It is logical to expect that, due to the costs of the ingredients, a drink containing honey would have been more expensive than one containing only malted cereals. Accordingly, in 1282 a law was passed stipulating that “*skolu ok husbændr hafa biorsalu ef þeim likar ok sele bollan fyrir fim ærtugh [...] Bolle mungatz skal gialda fimtan penningha.*”³⁴³ (housemasters can sell *bjórr* if they please and sell the bowl for five *qrtug* [...] a bowl of *mungát* shall be paid at fifteen *penningar*.) Taking into consideration that an *qrtug* was most probably equivalent to twenty *penningar*³⁴⁴ (i.e. a hundred *penningar* for a bowl of *bjórr*) this would imply that a bowl of *bjórr* was six times more expensive than a bowl of *mungát*. This would be acceptable by the consumer only if the ingredients involved in the brewing of *bjórr* were more expensive than the ingredients involved in brewing *mungát*. That is, up to 1282 *bjórr* might have still referred to Nordic *bjórr*, a sweetened beverage. In 1316 another law was passed establishing that “*engin maðr skal kaupa bior dyra en fyrir mork tunnuna.*”³⁴⁵ (no man shall trade *bjórr* for more than a mark [or a hundred] per barrel). As we have no way to compare the price per barrel with any previous sources, we have no way of finding out which *bjórr* this text refers to. However, by 1420 we hear that one could acquire “*iiij*

³⁴² Kylstra, p. 12.

³⁴³ NGL III, p. 16. Part of *Kong Erik Magnussöns Reterbod om Handel og Taxter i Bergen*, dated September 16, 1282, in Bergen.

³⁴⁴ IED, *qrtug*.

³⁴⁵ NGL III, p. 124. Part of *Kong Haakon Magnussöns Retterbod om Kjøbstevne i Byerne* dated November 14, 1316, in Bergen.

*tunnur biors fyrir hundrat*³⁴⁶ (four barrels of *bjórr* for a hundred) while one would get “*tunna vins fyrir klent .c.*”³⁴⁷ (a barrel of *vín* for a clean hundred). First of all it is quite noteworthy that from being a drink that was up to six times more expensive than *mungát*, now *bjórr* became a beverage from four to sixteen times cheaper than wine, which would place it on the same price-scale as *mungát*. Second, the price per barrel of *bjórr* decreased four times compared with 1316 prices. There might be several explanations for this fact. After all more than a hundred years separate both price-lists and the currency could have become devalued, or the advent of the Hansa could have made *bjórr* cheaper. However, it is *bjórr* price in contrast with wine price what makes me suspect that this charter is referring to Hanseatic *bjórr* rather than to Nordic *bjórr*.

Unfortunately the evidence is too scarce to draw any straightforward conclusions. However, based on archaeological evidence it seems that

in Northern temperate Europe at least, some of the early alcoholic beverages were of a ‘mixed’ nature; all kinds of sugar source being pressed into service. It may not have been until the 1st millennium BC that ‘pure’ drinks, such as mead and ale, began to appear.³⁴⁸

Drinks of a mixed nature have been recorded in Bronze Age Scandinavia, and there is no reason to suppose that their concoction would have disappeared with the advent of ‘pure’ drinks. *Bjórr* might have been one of those mixed drinks that survived until the Early Middle Ages. The fact that in the oldest sources *bjórr* is mentioned implies that it is a drink native to Scandinavia. It is also interesting to note that in the law corpus, references to *ql* decrease proportionately to the increase of references to *bjórr*, which makes one suspect that there was a shift in the meaning of *bjórr*. As we have seen, glosses in Anglo-Saxon and Norse manuscripts equate *bjórr* with mead or a similar drink. This may imply that in its earliest stage it was a drink of a mixed nature, fortified

³⁴⁶ DN XX, p. 28.

³⁴⁷ DN XX, p. 28.

³⁴⁸ Hornsey, pp. 219-20.

and sweetened with honey or fruit juices. But languages seem to shift in order to adapt to trading necessities, and that might have been the case with Nordic *bjórr*.

2.6 – CONCLUSIONS

As we have seen, there were mainly four different sugar sources that could be used for alcohol production: lactose, maltose, glucose and fructose. Of these, the only source that was ready at hand and could be obtained relatively easy was lactose. However, the ordinary nature of these beverages, added to their acidic flavour, led them to be somewhat despised. Cereals, the source of maltose, were produced in Norway and Iceland, albeit on a scale that did not grant these countries agrarian independence. However, grain could be easily transported, stored and brewed. Even if the costs of grain and malt were quite high, maltose-based fermented drinks seem to have been the most popular ones during our period of study. Glucose-based drinks were difficult to produce. First of all, honey, the only available glucose-source for producing them, was not easily obtained nor easily stored. All our sources suggest that by the period in which the literary sources were written down *mjqðr* had already become an outdated or archaic beverage, produced, maybe just on a minor scale. *Vín*, the only fructose-based beverage mentioned in the sources seems to have been the most prestigious of the beverages that were actually consumed. This is partly due to its high cost as well as to its exotic nature. As we have seen, saga writers did not seem to be familiar with the raw materials involved in wine preparation. It was a product mainly consumed in the legendary sagas and, most often in a rather exotic context. During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries wine was mainly imported from Germany and possibly England. Finally, beverages of a mixed nature are most likely to have existed. However, the virtual lack of references leaves us without an answer about the ingredients involved in their preparation. *Bjórr*

seems to have been a fortified kind of *qI*, perhaps involving the use of honey as an additional sucrose source.

In Iceland, brewing was a rather expensive procedure. This is not only due to the lack of raw material to produce alcohol, but also to the lack of fuel which was necessary both for malting and brewing the mash. Brewing cauldrons, as has been seen, were not easy to procure. Thus, alcohol production and consumption in the West Norse world seems to have been an activity which only the rich and powerful could afford. This high cost of alcohol meant that each beverage had a symbolic meaning and status attached to it. Wine, as the most expensive and exotic product became the beverage associated with Óðinn and with the kings and heroes of the *Fornaldar sqgur*. Perhaps only the richest members of the societies that produced the literary sources could afford to consume it. *QI* and *mungát* are the most commonly mentioned beverages, perhaps because they were the easiest ones to produce, transport and store. On the other hand, lactose-based beverages are conspicuous by their virtual absence in the literary and historical sources. If there was a source of alcohol that could be consumed on an almost daily basis, it was most probably a dairy-based product. However, the fact that they were relatively inexpensive and acidic might have prevented them from being the subject of literature. And when they was the subject of literature they are often portrayed as products consumed by villains or offered as an act of treachery, that is, if they are said to be drunk at all, for more often they appears in literature serving other roles, such as extinguishing fires or as a hiding place. Finally, *mjqðr* and *bjórr* do not seem to have been consumed often, if at all. They became the subject of poetry and myth, as we shall see in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 3- MYTHOLOGICAL ORIGINS AND IDEAS OF ALCOHOL AND DRINKING

In this chapter I will approach Old Norse drinking culture according to the mythological sources. However, I will focus more on what these sources have to tell us about the origin and role of alcohol than on the act of drinking. The study will be mostly based on both the *Poetic Edda* and Snorri's *Edda*, though I will also refer to any other sources that may contribute to clarify the mythic construct of alcoholic beverages.

Alcohol in general, particularly mead, seems to play diverse roles in Old Norse mythology. This is due to the fact that our sources provide several, and sometimes contradictory, stories about the origin and function of alcoholic beverages. Thus, in this chapter I will approach the topic from many different angles, paying special attention to the various ways in which mead is portrayed. In the first section, "Mead, Wisdom and Poetry", I will study the different stories about the way in which the *Æsir* gained access to mead as well as its possible connection to poetic diction. It is my belief that the different fragments referring to this story either form part of several different stages in the development of a single myth or that they actually belong to different myths about the way in which the gods and mankind gained access to mead. This idea diverges from the accepted scholarship, which considers the different renderings and sources of the myth as fragments belonging to a single tradition.

The second section, 'Drinking in *Ásgarðr*' will be devoted to the analysis of the few references to drinking in the realm of the *Æsir*. First, I will examine the role of the mythical goat, *Heiðrún*, from whose udders flows the mead that the *einherjar* drink in *Valhǫll*. This goat, as we will see, has some connections with the *Jǫtnar*. Secondly, I will study the way in which the *Æsir*'s drinking halls are presented and the role of drinking in the afterlife. Finally I will briefly analyze the role of the *Valkyrjur* as waiters in *Valhǫll*.

The third and last section, “The Æsir’s Quest for Alcohol Among The *Jqtnar*” will focus on mythological drinking scenes which take place outside of Ásgarðr. Here I will analyze different fragments that indicate that, apparently, in Old Norse mythology the *Jqtnar* were perceived as the Æsir’s main source of alcohol and, perhaps, even as the inventors of brewing. Here we will see, once more, what seem to be several stages of the evolution of a single myth (if not several myths) in which the creation of alcohol was attributed to the *Jqtnar*. This may be part of the evolution of a myth in which brewing was originally the creation of the dwarves and at a later stage was credited to the *Jqtnar*.

3.1- MEAD, WISDOM AND POETRY

Almost at the beginning of *Skáldskaparmál*, a treatise about poetic language written c. 1220, Snorri Sturluson provides us with an elsewhere unattested account of the creation of poetry. This story is narrated as part of a dialogue between Bragi, the god of poetry,³⁴⁹ and Ægir, most probably identified as the god of the sea.³⁵⁰ During their conversation Bragi answers Ægir’s question about the origin of poetry. He tells him that after the war between the Æsir and the *Vanir* both families of gods “*lqgðu með sér friðstefnu ok settu grið á þá lund at þeir gengu hvárirtveggju til eins kers ok spýttu í hráka sínum.*”³⁵¹ (arranged a peace meeting and set a truce in this way, that both sides went to a vat and spat their spittle into it.) Not wanting to let this peace-symbol decay, they decide to create a man out of the spittle-mixture. This man is called Kvasir, a being so wise that he has an answer to every question that is posed to him. He then travels

³⁴⁹ Though there is a possibility that Bragi, the god of poetry, is the deified representation of Bragi Boddason, a ninth-century poet. On this topic see Gabriel Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North: The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1964), pp. 185-86.

³⁵⁰ In *Skspm* 33 Snorri mentions that Ægir, the sea-god, had asked for hospitality in Valhǫll (*Ægir sótti heimboð til Ásgarðs*), but the only occasion in which Snorri’s *Edda* depicts Ægir in that hall, is at the beginning of *Skspm*, as a part of the frame-story in which he talks with Bragi. Thus Ægir the sea-god and Ægir the character in the frame story may be identical.

³⁵¹ *Skspm* 57, p. 3.

around the world teaching his knowledge. But when Kvasir arrives as a guest to two dwarves, Fjalarr and Galarr, they kill him and mix his blood with honey in order to brew mead with the attribute that “*hverr er af drekkur verður skáld eða fræðamaðr.*”³⁵² (whoever drinks from it becomes a poet or a scholar.) This mead is poured into three vessels, two *ker* (vats) called Són and Boðn, and a *ketill* (pot) called Óðrerir. The dwarves keep the mead and conceal their crime by saying that Kvasir suffocated in his own wisdom because he could not find anyone wise enough to ask him intelligent questions. Later, Fjalarr and Galarr go on a boat trip with Gilligr, a *jqtunn* and, when their boat capsizes, Gilligr drowns. His widow weeps so loudly that Fjalarr cannot stand the noise and kills her. When Suttungr, Gilligr’s son, finds out about the death of his parents he tortures the dwarves in revenge. The dwarves save their lives by offering him the mead they made out of Kvasir’s blood as a compensation for Gilligr’s death. Suttungr accepts the mead and puts it in a place called Hnitbjörg (Beating-Rock), and sets his daughter, Gunnlóð, as its safe keeper.

This story about the origin of the mead of poetry is extant only in Snorri’s *Edda*. As a matter of fact the *Snorra Edda* is also the only source in which it is possible to find references to the creation of such wisdom-conferring mead. However the sage Kvasir does appear in three further texts. Let us examine them in order to find out if these other references to Kvasir can provide additional information about the origin of mead and of poetry. The first of these references is to be found in Snorri’s *Gylfaginning* 50 when the Æsir chase Loki in order to punish him for Baldr’s death. Apart from mentioning that it is Kvasir who finds the way to capture Loki the only other bit of information we get about him is that he: “*allra var vitrastr, er Kvasir heitir.*”³⁵³ (was the wisest of all, who is called Kvasir.) The second source is a stanza of Einarr skálaglamm’s poem *Vellekla*, composed c. 986 but preserved only in Snorri’s *Skáldskaparmál*. The stanza reads

³⁵² *Skspn* 57, p.3.

³⁵³ *Gylf* 50, p. 48.

*Hugstóran bið ek heyra - heyr, jarl, Kvasis dreyra -
foldar vqrð á fyrða fjarðleggjar brim dreggjar.*³⁵⁴

(Land's magnanimous guardian I bid hear –hear, earl, Kvasir's blood-
fiord-bone's men's yeast-surf.³⁵⁵)

The third and last occasion on which Kvasir appears in the Old Norse corpus is in Snorri's *Ynglinga saga*, also in connection with the story of the war between the Æsir and the Vanir. In this source, however, Kvasir does not appear as a man created out of the truce-spittle but as a member of the *Vanir* given as hostage to the Æsir after the war. Snorri recounts that the Æsir sent Hœnir as a hostage and “*með honum sendu Æsir þann, er Mímir hét, inn vitrastí maðr, en Vanir fengu þar í mót þann, er spakastr var í þeira flokki. Sá hét Kvasir.*”³⁵⁶ (with him the Æsir sent that one who is called Mímir, the wisest man, and thus the *Vanir* gave in return the wisest one among them. He was called Kvasir.) He is not mentioned again in the saga, so we do not get to know about his destiny. Yet the story goes that the *Vanir* behead Mímir and send his head to the Æsir. Óðinn takes Mímir's head and preserves it in herbs so that it will not rot. Óðinn then utters some magic charms over it so “*at þat mælti við hann ok sagði honum marga leynda hluti.*”³⁵⁷ (that it spoke with him and told him many secret things.)

Let us examine the four different episodes in which Kvasir is mentioned in order to find more information about the origins and roles of mead and poetry. First of all, it is quite noteworthy that Kvasir only appears in texts written by Snorri Sturluson, for even if *Vellekla* was composed by Einarr skálaglamm, the poem's surviving fragments are preserved only as part of Snorri's *Edda*. Of the four episodes in which Kvasir is mentioned only three may help us to gain some information about the origins of mead and poetry. These are, namely, the accounts of the war between the Æsir and the *Vanir* (preserved in *Skáldskaparmál* and in *Ynglinga saga*) as well as Einarr Skálaglamm's stanza containing what appears to be a kenning for poetry: *Kvasis dreyra* (Kvasir's

³⁵⁴ *Skspm* 3, p. 12.

³⁵⁵ Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, ed. and trans. by Faulkes, p. 70.

³⁵⁶ *Yng* IV, p. 12.

³⁵⁷ *Yng* IV, p. 13.

blood). First, I will analyze the fragments referring to the gods' war and then continue with the study of Einarr skálaglamm's stanza.

3.1.1 - PARALLELS BETWEEN KVASIR'S AND MÍMIR'S MYTHS

Even if Kvasir's role is not the same in both renderings of the war between the *Æsir* and *Vanir*, it is possible to find some structural parallels between the two versions of the truce. First, in both accounts the end result of the truce is that the gods obtain wisdom; in *Skáldskaparmál* this takes place through the creation of Kvasir while in *Ynglinga saga* it is achieved by the exchange of wise hostages. Thus the exchange of hostages and of spittle seems to be an exchange of lore, of knowledge, between the two groups of gods. Second, in *Ynglinga saga* Mímir assumes a role similar to the one Kvasir has in Snorri's *Edda*. That is, in both accounts one of the sages gets slain, and the killing results in the acquisition of even more knowledge. In *Skáldskaparmál* knowledge is gained in the form of the mead that turns a man into a *skald* (poet) or a *fræðamaðr* (scholar) while in *Ynglinga saga* knowledge is obtained in the form of a head which utters *marga leynda hluti* (many hidden things). In either case the result of the war and, moreover, of the truce is the acquisition of wisdom. In other texts Mímir's knowledge is associated with mead consumption, which renders a further parallel with the mead made out of Kvasir's blood. The seeress in *Vóluspá* says:

<i>alt veit ec, Óðinn,</i>	<i>hvar þú auga falt:</i>
<i>í inom mæra</i>	<i>Mímis brunni!</i>
<i>Dreccr miqð Mímir</i>	<i>morgin hverian</i>
<i>af veði Valfqðrs.³⁵⁸</i>	

(all I know, Óðinn, where you hid your eye: in the famous well of Mímir! Mímir drinks mead every morning from Valfqðr's [Óðinn's] pledge.)

Snorri quotes this stanza in *Gylfaginning* 15 and provides the following interpretation:

undir þeiri rót [of Yggdrasill] er til hrimbursa horfir, þar er Mímis brunnr, er spekð ok mannvit er í fölgit, ok heitir sá Mímir er á brunnninn. Hann er fullr af visindum fyrir því at hann drekkur ór

³⁵⁸ *Vsp* 28.

*brunninum af horninu Gjallarhorni. Þar kom Alfǫðr ok beiddisk eins drykkjar af brunninum, en hann fekk eigi fyrr en hann lagði auga sitt at veði.*³⁵⁹

(Under that root [of Yggdrasil] which turns towards the frost-giants, there is Mimir's well, which conceals wisdom and understanding, and he who is at the well is called Mimir. He is full of knowledge because he drinks of the well from the horn Gjallarhorn. There went Alfǫðr [Óðinn] and requested one drink from the well, and he got nothing before he laid his eye as a pledge.)

According to Snorri, the well has intelligence and wisdom (*spekð ok mannvit*) contained in it, and it is not clear if Mimir acquires those attributes because he drinks from the well or because he drinks from it using the horn Gjallarhorn.³⁶⁰ But, as Óðinn pledges his eye in exchange for a drink from the well, while *Vǫluspá* does not mention the drinking vessel he uses, we can assume that it is the liquid itself (mead according to *Vǫluspá* and unspecified in *Gylfaginning*) which confers the wisdom. Óðinn making a sacrifice in order to obtain wisdom is a commonplace in the Eddic sources. However, on the only occasion in which Mimir appears drinking mead in Eddic poetry it is never mentioned that he does so in order to obtain wisdom.³⁶¹ Thus, Mimir's acquisition of wisdom by the consumption of mead is only extant in Snorri's *Edda*. In her analysis of *Vǫluspá* Gro Steinsland attributes Mimir's knowledge to the fact that he drinks from Óðinn's pledge, arguing that the *vǫlva* makes this remark about Óðinn's eye and Mimir's well because

*hun vet at han matte betale dyrt, og enná har han ikke nok kunnskap. Han ser ikke så dypt som volven selv. Nei, hun vet at maktbalansen i kosmos er truet, at det nå er Mime som drikker mjød hver morgenstund av Valfaders øye. Mime bruker det pantsatt øyet som drikkekar. For det er Odins pant som gjør Mimes brønn til en visdomsbrønn.*³⁶²

(she knows that he [Óðinn] had to pay an expensive price, and yet he has not gained enough knowledge. No, she knows that the cosmological balance of power is in danger; that now it is Mimir who drinks mead every morning from Valfǫðr's eye. Mimir uses the pledged eye as a drinking vessel. Because it is Óðinn's pledge which turns Mimir's well into a wisdom-well.)

³⁵⁹ *Gylf* 15, p. 17.

³⁶⁰ Snorri stresses the *af því at* (because) when making reference to the fact that Mimir obtains his intelligence by drinking from the horn, and not from the well.

³⁶¹ See *Vsp* 28. The stanza just states that Mimir drinks mead, without mentioning any effects that the liquid may have on him.

³⁶² Gro Steinsland and P. M. Sørensen, *Vǫluspá* (Oslo: Pax Forlag, 1999), pp. 55-56.

A similar argument to that of Steinsland was first suggested by LeRoy Andrews in his 1928 article in which he explores the possibility of Mímir's head and mead as originating from the Germanic tradition of using human skulls as drinking vessels.³⁶³

Thus, he proposes that

Such a drinking-vessel fashioned from the skull of Mímir could readily have been designated in poetry both the head of Mímir and his fountain, from which Odin drank. That the wisdom of the living head should be retained in a beverage drunk from the skull is a not unnatural conception.³⁶⁴

The different accounts about Mímir (in which he appears as a *Jqtunn* or an *Ás* and, as either a disembodied head or a whole being) are not free of controversy and the possibility that there are different traditions about him, perhaps fused as one in later sources, has already been suggested by several authors.³⁶⁵ As for Eddic poems, the evidence they provide is insufficient to find out whether the mead, the vessel or Óðin's pledge is actually the source of Mímir's intelligence. It is difficult to extract any conclusions from the sources narrating the story of Mímir and his mead. At the moment it is only possible to suggest that, due to structural similarities between both stories of the truce between the *Æsir* and the *Vanir* and between the roles that Kvasir and Mímir play in them, we should not discard the possibility that Snorri did, in fact, record at least two different traditions that connect mead with wisdom. Another possibility is that, by the thirteenth century, the sources which Snorri employed for the composition of the myths about Mímir and Kvasir were already the synthesis of several different older traditions. Thus, I would like to ask, together with LeRoy Andrews "whether certain other Old Norse mythological matter may not have originated under the influence of this myth [i.e. Mímir's head and well myth], particularly the somewhat farcically

³⁶³ Drinking vessels and the idea that the Norse might have used skulls as drinking vessels will be analyzed in chapter 6.

³⁶⁴ LeRoy A. Andrews, 'Old Norse Notes: Some Observations on Mímir', *Modern Language Notes*, 43:3 (1928), 166-71 (p. 168).

³⁶⁵ Jacqueline Simpson, 'Mímir: Two Myths or One?', in *Saga-Book*, 16 (1962-65), pp. 41-53. Mímir also appears in several kenningar for *jqtmar*, as for example in *Skspm* 18: "*Hrekkmimir*" (Mischief-Mímir).

employed conception of Odin securing his poetic inspiration from a draught of the mead of Suttungr.”³⁶⁶

THE NAME KVASIR AND THE ORIGIN OF BREWING

Perhaps knowing more about the possible origin of the name Kvasir could help us to gain insight into the basis of the myth about the mead of poetry. As a starting point we shall note that the name Kvasir is recorded only by Snorri, both in his *Edda* and in *Ynglinga saga*, and is not attested elsewhere in Old Norse sources.³⁶⁷ The only one of these sources that actually links Kvasir with mead or poetry is *Skáldskaparmál* 57.

There have been different attempts to clarify the etymology of Kvasir’s name,³⁶⁸ as *AEW* mentions, “*Die etymologie ist unsicher. Der zusammenhang mit dem mythus des skaldenmetes hat zum vergleich mit asl. kvasu ‘gegorener trank’ geführt, aber das ist höchst unsicher.*”³⁶⁹ (The etymology is uncertain. The connection with the myth of the mead of the scalds has led to the comparison with Old Slavic *kvasu* ‘yeasted drink’, but it is highly uncertain). Eugen Mogk has explained that:

*Kvasir n'est qu'une personification d'une boisson enivrante dont le nom rejoint le 'kvas' des peuples slaves. En effet, Kvasir est, avec un substantif kvas, dans le même rapport que Eldir, nom d'un des serviteurs d'Ægir, avec eldr 'feu', örnir, nom d'un géant, avec örn 'aigle', Byggvir, nom du serviteur du dieu de la fécondité Freyr, avec bygg 'orge', etc.*³⁷⁰

(Kvasir is nothing else but the personification of an intoxicating drink, whose name is paired with the *kvas* of Slavic people. As a matter of fact, Kvasir is, together with a substantive *kvas*, in the same relationship as Eldir, the name of one of Ægirs servants, with *eldr* ‘fire’, *Örnir*, the name of a giant, with *örn* ‘eagle’, *Byggvir*, name of the servant of Freyr the god of fertility, with *bygg* ‘barley’, etc.)

³⁶⁶ Andrews, p. 169.

³⁶⁷ As mentioned before, the name *Kvasir* appears only in *Yng* IV; *Gylf* 50; *Sksp*m G57 and 3; and in the skaldic poem *Vellekla*, preserved only as part of *Sksp*m.

³⁶⁸ Turville-Petre, p. 40; *IEW*, *Kvasir*. For a curious attempt to explain this name as a misunderstanding of the Latin adjective “*quasi*” in Orion’s myth see N.S. Hagen, ‘On the Origin of the name Kvasir’, *Arkiv för Nordisk Filologi*, 28:24 (1912), 127-139.

³⁶⁹ *AEW*, *Kvasir*.

³⁷⁰ Georges Dumézil, *Loki* (Paris: Flammarion, 1986), p. 75. Quoted from Dumezil as Mogk’s article is not properly referenced by the author and has proven impossible to locate.

Following Mogk's argument, the name would actually mean 'the kvas'; but as Hagen correctly points out, the substantive '*kvas*' is not attested in the Old Norse corpus.³⁷¹ It does, however, survive in some modern Scandinavian dialects: "*dans le danois du Jutland, kvas désigne les fruits écrasés et, en norvégien, le moût des fruits écrasés.*"³⁷² (in the Danish of Jutland *kvas* refers to the crushed fruits and, in Norwegian, to the must³⁷³ of crushed fruits) As a verb it is probably related to *kväsa* and *kvasa*, which in Scandinavian dialects means 'to press the juice out of'.³⁷⁴ If Hagen's and Dumézil's assumptions are correct, and the noun *kvas* originally means something on the line of juice of pressed fruits then the name Kvasir would mean 'the juice of fruits', 'the must', which can indeed sometimes be mixed with honey and water in order to add flavour to mead. We can also find a surviving cognate in the modern Russian noun *kvas*, which designates an alcoholic beverage produced out of fermented black-bread.

Going back to the myth itself, it seems that Kvasir's nature was mainly liquid. His was created out of spittle.³⁷⁵ Afterwards he continued his existence in the form of blood, which was extracted by the dwarves in order to transform it into mead, a different kind of liquid. Finally, he was transformed again into spittle, for Óðinn delivers the mead in that way after stealing it from Suttungr.³⁷⁶ Mogk attributes the story about Kvasir and his connection to the mead of poetry to Snorri's misreading of the kenning *kvasis dreyri* in the poem *Vellekla*. He argues that Snorri misinterpreted *dreyri* as 'blood', rendering the verse as 'listen to Kvasir's blood' while in other

³⁷¹ Hagen, 'Origin of the Name Kvasir', p. 129.

³⁷² Dumézil, p. 75.

³⁷³ The must is the juice of fruits before the fermentation process is complete.

³⁷⁴ Hagen, 'Origin of the Name Kvasir', p. 129. Hagen also mentions the Danish noun *kvas* (crushed fruit) and the verb *kvase* (to squash) as well as Modern English quash among the surviving cognates, thus she finds that the Old Norse *Kvasir* would mean something on the line of 'liquid of the fermenting mash'.

³⁷⁵ "*Créer un homme à partir d'un crachat, c'est une chose dont il n'y a pas d'autre exemple dans l'ethnographie ni dans la mythologie comparées*" (To create a man out of spittle is a thing for which there is no other example either in ethnography or in comparative mythology.) Mogk, Eugene, quoted in Dumézil, p. 76.

³⁷⁶ Óðinn's theft of the mead and Kvasir's final transformation into spittle will be dealt with later in section 3.1.3.

kenningar in which it appears it is usually used with the sense of ‘liquid’.³⁷⁷ As Dumézil puts it “*loin donc que la kenning kvasis dreyri prouve que, au Xe siècle, les scaldes aient connu l’histoire de Kvasir tué et de l’origine sanglante de l’hydromiel de poésie, il est bien probable que l’expression a signifié ‘le liquide kvas.’*”³⁷⁸ (the kenning *kvasis dreyri* is far from proving that in the 10th century the skalds had known the story of the death of Kvasir and of the bloody origin of the mead of poetry; it is quite probable that the expression signified ‘the liquid *kvas*.) This assumption seems to be correct also in the light of the fact that even if Snorri’s contemporary and succeeding skalds used mead in kenningar for poetry, they paid no heed to Kvasir’s blood myth in the construction of their kenningar. Maybe at the time Snorri wrote it, the myth was already perceived as a misinterpretation of the kenning.

Let us focus on Kvasir’s existence as blood, which seems to be the only source of the wisdom that is transmitted with the mead of poetry, even if it may be just as a by-product of the god’s spittle involved in his creation. In other sources drinking the blood of supernatural creatures appears as a source of courage or wisdom, in particular wisdom connected with speech abilities. For example, in the prose between stanzas 31 and 32 of *Fáfnismál*, Sigurðr tastes the blood dripping from the dragon’s (Fáfnir’s) heart as he roasts it, and the result is that he gains the ability to understand the language of birds. This idea is supported in the prose version of the story, *Vǫlsunga saga*,³⁷⁹ where the same happens and thus confirms that in the late thirteenth century this ancient belief was still supported, even if just as a transmission of the older Eddic lays. In *Hrólfs saga Kraka ok Kappa Hans*, HQtr, formerly a coward and a coal-biter, drinks the blood of a dragon and not only does he become a brave warrior, but also a very

³⁷⁷ Dumézil, p. 76.

³⁷⁸ Dumézil, p. 76.

³⁷⁹ Composed during the late thirteenth century and largely based on the Eddic lays about Sigurðr and the Niflungs.

articulate one.³⁸⁰ Thus, in spite of Mogk's and Dumezil's argument about Snorri misreading *dreyri* as blood instead of liquid, there is no apparent contradiction between Snorri's reading of the kenning and the connection between blood and wisdom. Blood and mead are elsewhere equated, as is the case of several kenningar for blood in which it is said to be the ravens' wine or the ravens' drink, accordingly battles were a ravens' feast. Now, ravens were considered to be, apart from good omens in battle,³⁸¹ Óðinn's pets; maybe as an extrapolation of Huginn (Thought) and Muninn (Memory), Óðinn's ravens which may represent his intellectual abilities. Thus, ravens were animals associated with wisdom as well as great blood-drinkers.

John Stephens argues that the story about Kvasir's killing is that of a quest for knowledge. "Kvasir", he states, "was killed for his blood, since this is what the dwarves take"³⁸² as there is no other evident motivation for his murder. He also finds a further blood connection in this search for knowledge. Kvasir's killers were two dwarves, and "dwarfs are elsewhere associated with both wisdom and blood: they are repositories of wisdom and *Vqluspá* 9 tells that they were made from [Brimir's] blood."³⁸³ Following his argument one would conclude that dwarves, as a product of blood and carriers of wisdom, would be the expected and most obvious brewers of the mead of poetry. There is however another evident reason for the dwarves being the brewers of the mead of poetry. As Dumezil puts forward:

Comme les Scandinaves avaient pris l'habitude d'attribuer aux nains la fabrication de tout l'équipement divin³⁸⁴ [...] ils auront attribué aux nains la fabrication de l'hydromiel et l'idée de mêler du miel, pour les faire fermenter, aux 'fruits écrasés' que désignait primitivement le nom commun kvasir.³⁸⁵

³⁸⁰ *Hrólfr* XXXV-XXXVI, p. 66-69.

³⁸¹ Turville-Petre, p. 59.

³⁸² John Stephens, 'The Mead of Poetry: Myth and Metaphor', *Neophilologus*, 56 (1972), 259-268 (p. 261).

³⁸³ Stephens, p. 259. *Vsp* 9 reads: "hverr skyldi dverga dróttir skepia / ór Brimis blóði ok ór Bláins leggiom" (who should shape the dwarves people out of Brimir's blood and from Bláins legs.) Snorri, on the other hand, says in *Gylf* that they were created out of the maggots which grew on Ymir's flesh, while his blood was turned into the sea. *Gylf* 8 and 14.

³⁸⁴ In *Sksp*m 35 dwarves create Sif's golden hair, Óðinn's spear Gungnir, Freyr's ship *Skiðblaðni*, the arm ring *Draupnir*, Freyr's boar and, Þórr's hammer *Mjöllnir*. In *Sqrla þáttir* they create Freyja's necklace.

³⁸⁵ Dumézil, p. 77.

As the Scandinavians had taken the habit of attributing to the dwarves the creation of all the divine equipment [...] they attributed to the dwarves the creation of the mead as well as the idea of mixing honey, in order to induce fermentation, to the 'crushed fruits' to which the noun *kvasir* originally referred to.

The dwarves seem to have several reasons to be considered as the creators of the mead of wisdom and poetry. Accordingly, mead is sometimes referred to in kenningar as the drink of dwarves. This could explain the reasons for Óðinn's drunkenness at the court of Fjalarr in *Hávamál* 14:

*Qlr ec varð, varð ofrqlvi,
at ins fróða Fialars.*³⁸⁶

(Drunk I became, became more than drunk,
at wise Fjalarr's place)

This passage is commonly considered as part of the myth of the stealing of the mead of poetry, to be discussed below. The name Fjalarr, as we have already seen, belongs to one of the dwarves who brewed the mead of poetry in Snorri's account. Fjalarr is also attested as a dwarf-name in *Vqluspá* 16. However, *Dvergatal*,³⁸⁷ the catalogue of dwarves in which it appears within the poem, is not free of controversy and is generally assumed to be a later interpolation. Fjalarr is also recorded as a *Jqtunn*-name in *Hárbarðsljóð* 26 and Snorri lists it also as a *Jqtunn*-name in *Skáldskaparmál* 75.

Could it be that by the time Snorri recorded the name Fjalarr the myth of the mead was at a stage in which its creation was attributed to the dwarves instead of to the *Jqtmar*, thus the name Fjalarr was assumed as the name of a dwarf? We shall never know. In the surviving literature both dwarves and *Jqtmar* appear as excellent brewers; therefore both races are perfect candidates to be portrayed as creators or owners of the drink.

Finally, the myth of the creation of Kvasir could be the reflection of a brewing ritual. Mogk has argued that "*la naissance de Kvasir à partir d'un crachat communiel des Ases et des Vanes repose sur une vieille technique élémentaire, sur un des procédés*

³⁸⁶ *Háv* 14.

³⁸⁷ *Dvergatal* comprises stanzas 9-16 of *Vsp*.

par lesquels beaucoup de peuples, d'une part, obtiennent la fermentation et, d'autre part, concluent amitié."³⁸⁸ (the birth of Kvasir from the communal spittle of the Æsir and the Vanir lays on an ancient elementary technique, on one of the procedures by which many nations, on one hand, produce fermentation and, on the other, settle their friendship.) The sources that point to the treaty after the Æsir-Vanir war make reference to a certain agreement between the races of gods, but only those quoted by Snorri mention what it consisted of and, as mentioned before, they point towards an exchange of wisdom. As we will see in the sections devoted to the role of alcohol in making marriage settlements and in funeral feasts,³⁸⁹ agreements were usually sealed with a toast, and as we will see in the last chapter of this study, sharing a drink was an important symbol of friendship. Thus the myth might have originated in social practice. Alternatively, the practice of sealing agreements and reaffirming friendships with alcohol could have originated from the myth of how the first dispute in the world was settled. In conformity with this argument, Oddgeir Hoftun proposes that in Snorri's myth of the creation of the mead of poetry it is not only the mead itself that plays a central role, but also the act of brewing. "*Ikke bare ølet, men også bryggingen av det har vært en hellig handling som fulgte rituelle påbud og krevde sine hellige ingredienser i form av ord og handlinger i tillegg til råstoffet og den rent nødvendige bearbeidingen.*"³⁹⁰ (Not only the beer, but also its brewing, have been a sacred act which followed a ritual order and needed its own sacred ingredients in the shape of words and actions in addition to the raw ingredients and their absolutely clean preparation.)

³⁸⁸ Mogk, quoted in Dumézil, p. 75.

³⁸⁹ Feasts will be studied in Chapter 5.

³⁹⁰ Oddgeir Hoftun, '*Ølet og Visdommen*', in *Norrøn Tro og Kult ifølge Arkeologiske Kilder* (Oslo: Solum Forlag, 2001), pp. 255-265 (p. 257).

According to Dumézil, creating a man out of spittle is not attested in the ethnography of any other cultures nor in any other mythology;³⁹¹ but using the natural yeasts which are present in spittle in order to ferment a liquid was practiced in several Indo-European and non-Indo-European cultures. We can find a reminiscence of this practice in the late thirteenth- or early fourteenth-century *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka* when, during a brewing contest two women ask for the help of the gods: “*Signý hét á Freyju, en Geirhildr á Hött. Hann lagði fyrir dregg hráka sinn ok kveðst vilja fyrir tilkvámu sína þat er var milli kersins ok hennar. En þat reyndist gott öl.*”³⁹² (Signý invoked Freyja and Geirhildr called Hött [one of Óðinn’s names]. He put his spittle in the dregs and said that for his coming he wanted that which was between the kettle and her. And that proved to be good ale.) This episode bears some resemblance to the myth of the creation of Kvasir, who is formed out of the gods’ spittle and later transformed into an alcoholic beverage. But, due to the similarities and to the late date of *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka*, we shall take into account the possibility that the saga was influenced by Snorri’s account of the creation of the mead. In any case, we can just consider it as a literary example of the use of the yeasts present saliva for brewing. So, in Snorri’s account, we may be attesting several myths: that of the origin of brewing, that of the mead of poetry and finally that which instructs about the several ritual uses of alcohol.

3.1.2 - GAINING THE MEAD

From the ninth century onwards skaldic poetry often made references to the myth of the mead of poetry in kenningar that allude to its owners (i.e. dwarves, *Jqtnar*

³⁹¹ Dumézil, p. 76. However, Stith Thompson contradicts Dumézil’s point of view, as he records another case in an Indian tale in which spittle was transformed into a man: see Thompson, Stith, *Motif-Index of Folk Literature: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folk Tales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books, and Local Legends*, CD ROM (Indiana: Intelix Corporation/ Indiana University Press, 1993), D437.5- Transformation: Spittle to person.

³⁹² *Hálf I*, p. 95.

or Óðinn)³⁹³ or its origins, representing a well established tradition that equated a particular kind of mead with poetry. The connection seems to have been so close that “skalds use base words such as *mjqðr*, *biórr*, *ql*, *qldr*, *vin*, *lið*, and *veig* exclusively in kennings for poetry or blood.”³⁹⁴ Also, “with few exceptions, those hundreds of verses and dozens of half whole strophes [...] in the extant corpus which comment on the act of poetic composition do so either by referring specifically to the poetic mead story or by contriving a ‘consonant’ metaphor”³⁹⁵ legitimizing in the process, if not the myth of Kvasir, at least the myth about mead as the source of poetic diction (though, to my knowledge, there are no references to wisdom being the product of drinking this mead outside of Snorri’s *Edda*). As we will see, there is a variant of the myth of the mead in which Óðinn retrieves the mead from the *Jqtnar* and gives it to the *Æsir* and those men who are to become skalds. Consequently mead became not only the source of poetry, but also an ‘Óðinnic’ gift to men while Óðinn himself acquired a new rank and became, among the many other roles he already had, god of poetry. As early as the ninth century, Bragi Boddason described what a skald is, letting us know that alcohol and poetry were intrinsically connected.

*Skáld kalla mik skapsmið Viðurs,
Gauts gjafrqtuð, grepp óhneppan,
Yggs qlbera, óðs skap-Móða,
hagsmið bragar. Hvat er skáld nema þat?*³⁹⁶

(They call me a skald, thought-smith of Viður [Óðinn], the receiver of Gaut’s [Óðinn] gift, not lacking in art, Ygg’s [Óðinn] ale-bearer, mind/poetry creating Móði [i.e. poet], skilled maker of poetry. What is a skáld other than that?)

A skald would then be the smith of Óðinn’s thought, the receiver of Óðinn’s gift (the mead of poetry?), and the ale-bearer of Yggr (Óðinn). References to skalds as recipients

³⁹³ See *Skspm* 3 for a list of these terms.

³⁹⁴ Roberta Frank, ‘Snorri and the Mead of Poetry’, in *Specvlvm Norroenvm: Norse Studies in Memory of Gabriel Turville-Petre*, ed. by Ursula Dronke and others (Odense: Odense University Press, 1981), pp. 155-170 (p. 160, fn. 12).

³⁹⁵ Carol Clover, ‘Skaldic Sensibility’, *Arkiv for Nordisk Filologi*, 93 (1978), 63-81 (p. 69).

³⁹⁶ *Skspm* 54.

of the mead of poetry are so abundant in the corpus of skaldic poetry that there must have been a strong tradition connected with this particular form of inspiration.³⁹⁷

There are also several references to another possible origin of poetry in the form of Bragi, god of poetry, who appears to be a divinized portrait of the ninth-century poet Bragi Boddason and in any case usurps Óðinn's role as god of poetry. It is interesting to note that he is said to be married to Iðunn, the goddess whose fruits³⁹⁸ conferred immortality on the *Æsir*. Poetry and immortality were not distant concepts in the Old Norse world - one way of gaining 'immortality' among men was through a good poem in one's honour, which is further reflected by the important place that skalds occupied in the court. However, Bragi is never directly linked to the mead of poetry.

Finally there is another tradition related to the mead of Suttungr (and maybe of dwarves) in which mead does not appear to be connected with poetry at all. These sources are preserved in Eddic poetry and have been, on several occasions, interpreted in the light of Snorri's *Edda*. However, when it comes to the different stories about how the mead reached the worlds of the *Æsir* and men, there are many discrepancies about the properties of the mead as well as of its acquisition. We should remember that myths change through time, and those which were committed to writing may represent not only different traditions about a particular myth, but also several different stages in its evolution. Keeping that in mind, in this section I will analyze the different fragments in which Óðinn gains access to the mead in the *Poetic Edda* and question them as independent sources in order to see what can be learnt from them.

The story of how Óðinn gained access to the mead is recounted in four different sources, though not all of them allude to it as being the source of poetry or wisdom. As a matter of fact, it seems that these refer to different meads or, more likely, that they

³⁹⁷ For a further analysis on the mead as origin of poetry and its skaldic tradition see: Clover, 'Skaldic Sensibility', pp. 63-81; and Frank, 'Snorri and the Mead', pp. 155-70.

³⁹⁸ "The Norse word *epli*, which appears in various forms in all Germanic languages, does not only mean 'apple'. It is applied to other round fruits, and even to acorns." Turville-Petre, p. 186.

represent different traditions of Óðinn's acquisition of a ritually and socially significant beverage. There also seems to be a certain evolution in the concept of the mead, which I will try to outline in the following pages, though it is impossible to reconstruct the whole myth of the acquisition of the mead based on the fragments in which it is narrated.

Óðinn's acquisition of the mead, not always represented as theft, is preserved in the collection of Eddic poems *Hávamál* stanzas 11-14, 104-10 and 140, as well as in Snorri Sturluson's *Skáldskaparmál* G57-58. Some of the sources tell a similar story, but with some differences, which can add to our understanding of a particular kind of mead as the source of poetry. I will begin the analysis of these myths, taking as a starting point the most extensive of the *Hávamál* fragments.

Rather than a single poem, *Hávamál* is a compilation of several different poems, or fragments of poems, in which the main narrator is Óðinn. It is preserved in the *Codex Regius* of the *Poetic Edda*, written c. 1270. Scholars have not arrived at a single conclusion when it comes to the number of different poems into which the 164 stanzas of the *Hávamál* are divided. And when it comes to the dating and possible Christian influences³⁹⁹ in the poem, there is even less agreement. The poem seems to be the work of an editor who brought together 5 or 6 different poems, which can be thematically divided as follows:

a) The Gnostic Poem (stanzas 1-103), comprising a collection of sayings and advice about social behaviour.

b) The Gunnlǫð Episode (stanzas 104-10), where Óðinn relates how he acquired the mead (of poetry?).

c) The *Loddfáfnismál* (stanzas 111-37), where advice is given to a character called Loddfáfnir.

³⁹⁹ On this topic see Carolyne Larrington, 'Hávamál and Its Sources outside Scandinavia', *Saga-Book*, 23:3 (1991), 141-57.

d) *Rúnatal* (stanzas 138-45), where Óðinn relates how he got access to runic knowledge (and mead) through a self-sacrifice.

e) *Ljóðatal* (stanzas 146-64), in which Óðinn lists the spells he knows.⁴⁰⁰

The larger fragment in which the story about the mead is related falls in a section of its own, where Óðinn is the sole and only narrator. Due to its brevity, I will quote it in its entirety.

104- *Inn aldna iqtun ec sóttá; nú em ec aptr um kominn;*
fát gat ec þegiandi þar;
margom orðom mæltá ec í minn frama
í Suttungs sglom.

(104. - The ancient *iqtunn* I visited; now I am back; little got I by being silent there; many words I spoke to my advantage in Suttungr's hall.)

105- *Gunnlqð mér um gaf gullnom stóli á*
drycc ins dýra miðar;
ill iðgjald lét ec hana eptir hafa
sins ins heila hugar,
sins ins svára sefa.

(105. - Gunnlqð gave me from upon her golden throne a draught of the precious mead; a bad recompense I gave her afterwards for her sincerity, for her affectionate response.)

106- *Rata munn létomc rúms um fá*
ok um griót gnaga;
yfir oc undir stóðomc iqtna vegir;
svá hætta ek hqfði til.

(106. – The mouth of the gimlet managed to make up space and bit on the rock; above and below me were the ways of the giants [i.e. rocks]; in such a way I risked my head.)

107- *Vel keyptz litar hefí ec vel notið,*
fás er fróðom vant;
þviat Óðrerir er nú upp kominn
*á alda vés iaðar.*⁴⁰¹

⁴⁰⁰ As the fragments to be analyzed within the next few pages don't fall within parts of the poem around which there is disagreement, I have chosen to present a rather abridged way of dividing the poem taken from Carolyne Larrington, 'Prologue to Svava Jakobsdóttir's 'Gunnlqð and the Precious Mead'', in *The Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Mythology*, ed. by Paul Acker and others (New York & London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 27-29 (p. 27). For different approaches to the way of dividing the poem see: Jón Helgason, 'Indledning', in *Eddadigte I: Vqluspá-Havamál*, ed. by Jón Helgason, 3 vols (Oslo: Dreyers Forlag, 1955), pp. V-XVII; David A. H. Evans, 'Hávamál', in *Medieval Scandinavia*, ed. by Pulsiano, pp. 272-73 (p. 272) and; David A.H. Evans, 'Introduction', in *Hávamál*, ed. by Evans, pp. 1-38 (pp. 4-8).

⁴⁰¹ This verse can have two different readings. If we read *vel* with a short 'e' then it would be making reference to a "well-bought beauty". However, if we read *vél* instead of *vel* then the verse would refer to a beauty bought by fraud, which seems to be more fitting with the context and with the way in which Óðinn presents his deed, openly admitting that it was not a very fair trade.

(107. – Of the well bought beauty have I made good use, to the wise now little is lacking; because Óðrerir has now come up to the sanctuaries of men.)

108- *Jfi er mér á, at ec væra enn kominn*
iqtna gqrðom ór,
ef ec Gunnlaðar ne nytac, innar góðo kono, þeirar
er lqgðomk arm yfir.

(108. - I am not sure if I would have come safe from the Jqtun's yard if I had not made use of Gunnlqð, the good woman, over whom I laid my arm.)

109- *Ins hindra dags gengu hrimþursar*
Háva ráðs at fregna Háva hqlló í;
at Bqlverki þeir spurðo, ef hann væri með bçndom kominn
eða hefði hánom Suttungr of sóit.

(109. – The following day went the frost-giants to Hávi's [Óðin] hall to ask for Hávi's advice. They asked about the mischief-doer, if he had come to his retinue or if Suttungr had killed him.)

110- *Baugeið Óðinn hygg ec at unnit hafi;*
hvat scal hans tryggðom trúa?
Suttung svikinn hann lét sumbli frá
oc grætta Gunnlqðo.⁴⁰²

(110. – I thought that Óðinn had sworn a ring-oath; how shall his oaths be trusted! He left Suttungr betrayed at the feast, and made Gunnlqð weep.)

The placing of this fragment within *Hávamál* looks like a conscious editorial choice, for it follows the theme of the advice given in the last verses of stanza 103. In it, a narrative voice that cannot be clearly associated with Óðinn, and which is perhaps an intrusive second narrator in *Hávamál*, ends its advice declaring that “*fimbulfambi heitir, sá er fát kann segia, / þat er ósnotrs aðal.*”⁴⁰³ (great fool is called / that who can say little, that is the characteristic of the fool.) This places stanza 104 in context, as it appears as an example of what a man can achieve by the art of speech. Accordingly, the ‘Gunnlqð Episode’ opens with Óðinn bragging about how he managed to have his way at Suttungr’s due to his oral abilities: “*Fát gat ec þegiandi þar; / mqr gom orðom mæltu ec í minn frama / í Suttungs sçlom.*”⁴⁰⁴ (little I got there by being silent, many words I spoke in my advantage at Suttungr’s hall.). Seen in this context, it is interesting to note

⁴⁰² *Háv* 104-10.

⁴⁰³ *Háv* 103.

⁴⁰⁴ *Háv* 104.

that the acquisition of the gift of poetic eloquence (if that is what Óðinn indeed acquired by drinking mead), in the form of mead, would have been achieved by means of the use of another kind of eloquence. However, the poem pays little attention to the mead itself and seems to concentrate more on the deception Óðinn practiced on Gunnlǫð in order to obtain her favours.

Four out of the seven stanzas of the fragment focus on Gunnlǫð's story, while the mead is mentioned only on two occasions: *Gunnlǫð mér um gaf gullnom stóli á / drycc ins dýra miðar* (Gunnlǫð gave me from upon her golden throne/ a draught of the precious mead) in stanza 105 and *Óðrerir / er nú upp kominn / á alda vés iðar* in stanza 107. (*Óðrerir / has now come up to the sanctuaries of men.*). Stanza 105 tells us that Óðinn convinced Gunnlǫð to allow him to drink from the precious mead and that he gave her a poor reward for her 'sincere heart'. Stanzas 107 and 108 tell of the seduction of Gunnlǫð as a stratagem to take the mead to the world of men and acknowledge Gunnlǫð's central role in his escape. Finally, in stanza 110 the frost-giants are aware that Óðinn himself was the *bq/verkr*, 'mischief-causer', and reproach him for breaking the ring-oath he made (presumably with Gunnlǫð) thus making Gunnlǫð cry. The mead does not seem to be the central object of the fragment, which seems to focus more on Gunnlǫð's tragedy of either falling in love or getting married and then being abandoned. With this, I do not mean that the mead does not play an important role; after all its acquisition was the main objective of Óðinn's expedition. But its theft does not seem to upset the Jǫtnar as much as the deception of the jǫtunn girl. They went on their quest to find the 'mischief-causer', and once they find him, they question him about his cheating of Suttungr and Gunnlǫð and about his honesty in general, but they do not mention a single thing about returning the mead. This episode seems to be mostly

related with the *Æsir*'s constant quest to take advantage of the *Jqtnar*, and part of their constant quest to obtain alcoholic beverages at the *Jqtnar*'s expense.⁴⁰⁵

There are as many different versions of the myth of the mead as renderings of it. It is my belief that the one preserved in *Hávamál* 104-10 does transmit the myth of the acquisition of mead for gods and men, but it may relate more to a proto-mead than to mead as an actual source of poetry and knowledge.⁴⁰⁶ A drink with such an important ritual and social implication could well have had a myth attached about how it came to the realm of men. The closest parallel that comes to mind is that of Prometheus stealing the fire from the gods in order to offer it to mankind. Just as in the Greek myth, the stealing of the fire or mead does not imply that those who were robbed were to be rendered fireless or meadless,⁴⁰⁷ thus the offence consisted more in the act of defiance from the gods towards the *Jqtnar* than in the actual loss of the object. As a result, and as we can perceive in *Hávamál* 109 and 110, the *Jqtnar* were more offended about being tricked than by the actual loss of the mead.

There are two instances in *Hávamál* 104-10 that are considered to link the mead with the mead of poetry, but that approach seems to be due more to the attachment of a rather unusual adjective to the mead as well as to the reading of the later and longer version of the myth (namely that in Snorri Sturluson's *Skáldskaparmál*) as a way of decodifying these stanzas. Let us begin with the fact that mead is called *dýrr mjǫðr*⁴⁰⁸ (precious mead). The Old Norse adjective *dýrr* (precious, dear) appears thirteen times in Eddic poetry⁴⁰⁹, in which it is linked twice with mead and three times with strong alcoholic drinks in general (*veig*). In *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*, after going inside

⁴⁰⁵ *Jqtnar*, as alcohol providers, will be studied in section 3.3.

⁴⁰⁶ Van Hamel argues, in the light of Snorri's use of this fragment and its relationship to the other two fragments in *Háv*, that this section of the poem seems to represent the earliest version of the myth. See A. G. van Hamel, 'Gods, Skalds and Magic', *SBVS*, 11 (1928-36), 129-52.

⁴⁰⁷ The *Jqtnar*, as we will see in section 3.3, were often depicted as master brewers.

⁴⁰⁸ *Háv* 105.

⁴⁰⁹ *Grp* 27, *Fm* 41, *Háv* 105 and 140, *Am* 67 *HHII* 46, *Rþ* 48, *Hdl* 34, *Hlqð* 16, *Vkv* 1, *Herv* 11 and, *Hög* 25 and 26. See *CEP*, *dýrr*.

the mound of her dead husband and offering to stay with him in the land of the dead, Sigrún tells him that now “*vel scolom drecca dýrar veigar*”⁴¹⁰ (we shall drink the precious beverage), after which she makes up a bed and prepares herself to lie with him. The *dýr veig* in this instance seems to be associated more with a sacred wedding than with poetry. In *Hlqðskviða*, an Eddic poem not included in the *Codex Regius* but preserved as part of *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, *dýrar veigar* seems to refer to any costly or dear beverage in general. In it, King Humli⁴¹¹ asks his men to sit and rest during the winter, while he has the chance to prepare his revenge for some offences. Then he tells his retinue:

*Sitja skulum í vetr ok sælliga lifa,
drekka ok dæma dýrar veigar.*⁴¹²

(We shall sit during the winter and have a life of enjoyment, / talk and drink the precious beverage.)

In *Hyndluljóð* 50, *dýrar veigar* refers to a more special kind of drink, as it is meant to be a certain *minnisql*, (memory-ale), which is in the power of Hyndla, a dead *jqtunn*-woman. Following a pattern that we will discuss in the following pages, one the *Vanir*, Freyja on this occasion, journeys to visit a *jqtunn* in order to obtain an alcoholic drink. In this case, she tries to acquire *minnisql*⁴¹³ on behalf of Óttarr, her lover, so that he will be able to remember his lineage. This ale bears some resemblance to the mead of poetry in its ability to confer a certain degree of knowledge and maybe even rhetoric, as she asks Hyndla

*Ber þú minnisql mínom gelli,
svát hann ql muni orð at tína
þessar ræðo á þriðia morni
þá er þeir Angantýr ættir rekia.*⁴¹⁴

(Bring the ale of memory to my boar [Óttarr had assumed this shape] so he can remember all the words

⁴¹⁰ *HHII* 46.

⁴¹¹ It is noteworthy that the Old Norse noun *humall*, to which the name Humli might be related, means ‘hop-plant’. The word *humall* is related to the Latin *humulus*, meaning hop plant. See *IEW*, *humall*.

⁴¹² *Heiðr* XII, p. 58-59.

⁴¹³ Magic drinks are analyzed in section 7.1.

⁴¹⁴ *Hdl* 45.

and remember this conversation in the third morning,
when he enumerates his kin for Angantýr.)

Thus, it seems that this ale would confer on him not only the ability to remember Hyndla's words, but also the verbal ability to make a proper speech at Angantýr's hall and, with it, re-gain his status. As the *jqtunn*-woman denies them the drink, Freyja states that "*hann skal drecca dýrar veigar*"⁴¹⁵ (He shall drink the precious beverage), providing us with the third and last example in the Eddic poems of such an adjective attached to a drink that is not associated with the mead of poetry.

The only other instance in which the adjective *dýrr* is attached to mead is in another passage of *Hávamál* usually considered to be one of the versions of the myth of the mead of poetry. The stanza is contained in the part of the poem known as *Rúnatal*, which together with the *Gnomic Poem* (*Hávamál* stanzas 1-103) is "considered to be among the oldest surviving Eddic verse, although a number of scholars have maintained that they can identify post-Conversion material in the Gnomic Poem."⁴¹⁶ The *Rúnatal* itself is not free of controversy, as its depiction of Óðinn's sacrifice, hanging from a tree to come back to life nine days after has been paralleled with the image of Christ on the cross.⁴¹⁷ Almost at the beginning of Óðinn's narration and enumeration of how he obtained runic lore, Óðinn explains how he was hanging and suffering from thirst; then when he got access to the runes, we are told

*Fimbullióð nío nam ec af inom frægia syni
Bqlþórs, Bestlo fqður,
oc ec drycc of gat ins dýra miadar,
ausinn Óðrerir.*⁴¹⁸

(Nine powerfull spells I got from the famous son of
Bqlþór, Bestla's father, and a drink I got of the
precious mead, poured from Óðrerir.)

On this occasion, just as in *Hávamál* 105, Óðinn gets a single drink of the *dýra mjadar*⁴¹⁹ from a *jqtunn*. This time it is provided to him by the son of Bqlþór, Bestla's

⁴¹⁵ *Hdl* 50.

⁴¹⁶ Larrington, 'Prologue', p. 27.

⁴¹⁷ Turville-Petre, pp. 42-50.

⁴¹⁸ *Háv* 140.

father. “Bölthór, whom Snorri calls Bölthorn, was a giant, and was father of Bestla, Óðinn’s giantess mother. The famous son of Bölthorn must, in this case, be a giant and Óðinn’s maternal uncle.”⁴²⁰ However, in his journey to the land of the dead Óðinn obtains wisdom from his uncle and not from the drink itself. Apart from quenching Óðinn’s thirst, the *dýra mjaðar* does not seem to play any role in his quest for wisdom, it is more a sign of greeting and offering hospitality than the main objective of Óðinn’s journey.⁴²¹ The offering of the mead seems to be more in relationship with Óðinn’s thirst and hunger while he was hanging from the tree and a friendly answer to his complaint⁴²² “*við hleifi mic sældo né við hornigi*”⁴²³ (no bread did they offer me nor a [drinking] horn) than the actual offering of a sacred drink.

The misconception of the mead which Óðinn gets in *Hávamál* 105 and 140 being the mead of poetry, may be due to the fact that scholars tend to approach these stanzas taking Snorri’s account as a tool for their interpretation, not taking into account that the fragments may belong either to a different myth about mead or just to a myth involving mead. Another element that might have led to this misreading may be the fact that in these passages mead is labelled *dýra mjaðar*. As we have seen above, the adjective *dýrr* is commonly attached to beverages in Eddic poetry.⁴²⁴ Mead, unlike other drinks, seems to have had a special role in Old Norse society, which is also reflected in the linguistic fact that almost every time mead is mentioned in Eddic verse it has an adjective attached to it. Mead appears accompanied by an adjective in 60% of the 23

⁴¹⁹ The fact that the mead is called Óðrerir will be discussed below.

⁴²⁰ Turville-Petre, p. 49.

⁴²¹ In Eddic poetry, it is a commonplace that when someone enters a hall he is said to be thirsty, and with the exception of *Grm* and *Hym* in which the mead is expected but not offered, the newcomers are usually welcomed with something to drink. *Háv* 3, *Vm* 8; *Skm* 16; *Ls* 6, 10; *Þrm* 22, 24 and *Bdr* 7. In Snorri’s *Gylf* 2, when Gylfi enters Valhǫll, Hár welcomes him by saying “*en heimill er matr ok drikkir honum sem ǫllum þar í Háva hǫll.*” (and you are free to have any food and drink like everyone else here in Hávi’s hall.)

⁴²² In the case of Óðinn, his being thirsty and hungry without having any hope of hospitality, and later receiving a horn to drink from as a sign of friendship has a parallel in the prose section preceding the first stanza of *Grm*.

⁴²³ *Háv* 139.

⁴²⁴ 42% of the occasions in which it is used in Eddic poetry it is attached to drinks, the remaining 58% of the occasions it is used for either kings, warriors or weapons. See *CEP*, *dýrr*.

times it is mentioned in Eddic poetry⁴²⁵. The modifiers to be found accompanying “mjǫðr” are:

1. - *Dýrr* (precious, dear): “*ins dýra miðar*” (*Hávamál* 105 and 140)
2. - *Heilagr* (holy): “*helga miqð*” (*Sigrdrífumál* 18)
3. - *Mærr* (famous): “*mæran drycc miðar*” (*Lokasenna* 6); “*inn mæra miqð*” (*Skírnismál* 16); “*miqð mærar*” (*Atlamál* 8)
4. – *Forn* (ancient): “*forns miðar*” (*Skírnismál* 37; *Lokasenna* 53)
5. – *Góðr* (good): “*inn góða miqð*” (*Grímnismál* 13)
6. – *Hreinn* (clean, bright, clear): “*inn hreina miqð*” (*Sólarljóð*: 56)⁴²⁶
7. – *Skírr* (clear, bright, pure): “*skíra miðar*” (*Grímnismál* 25); “*miqðr, skírar veigar*” (*Baldurs draumar* 7)
8. – *Meinblandinn* (mixed with evil, poisonous): “*meinblandinn miqðr*” (*Sigrdrífumál* 8); “*blend ec þeim svá meini miqð*” (*Lokasenna* 3)

In contrast to the ways in which mead is commonly described, other drinks mentioned in Eddic poetry do not tend to have an adjective associated with them. None of the 8 occurrences of *bjórr*, 9 of *vín*, 19 of *ql* nor the 2 of *mungát* have any attached adjective. They are just the plain drink, with no characteristics added. The only one which has some modifiers connected to it (apart from *miqðr*) is *veig*, which, as we have seen above, in many occasions works as a substitute for *miqðr*.⁴²⁷

The fact that “*miqðr*”, unlike other drinks, tends to be accompanied by a modifier reflects that mead was considered to be a special drink; that it was a subject in itself for poetic celebration, but this does not imply that every single kind of mead had special attributes. Thus, this should not lead us to believe that every time mead is called

⁴²⁵ CEP, *mjǫðr*.

⁴²⁶ Even though this poem is not included in the Poetic Edda it is written in eddic metre.

⁴²⁷ *Veig*, according to *IED* means “a kind of strong beverage, drink” (*IED*, *veig.*), *OGNS* defines it as “*stærk drikk*” (strong drink) (*OGNS*, *veig.*) The drink can thus mean any strong beverage, but due to the few occasions in which it appears in the whole Old Norse corpus and the fact that in Eddic verse it seems to be used as a synonym of mead on most of the obvious occasions, it could well be taken as meaning ‘strong mead’. In Eddic verse *veig* is described as *skírr* (clear, bright, pure) in *Bdr* 7; *dýrr* (dear) in *Hnd* 34, *Hlqð* 16 and *HHIII* 46, and *hollr* (salutary) in *Hlqð* 7 in 5 of the 9 times it is mentioned.

famous, ancient, holy or precious, it refers to a poetry-inspiring beverage; it appears to be mainly the result of a poetic convention.

The second element which, in my understanding, leads scholars to link the mead in stanzas 105, 107 and 140 of *Hávamál* with the mead presented by Snorri in his *Skáldskaparmál* is the fact that it is called Óðrerir, as is one of the containers in Snorri's book. Faulkes proposes that the etymology of Óðrerir probably comes from *óðr* (mind, fury, frenzy) and *hræra* (move, stir) or *hrærir* (mover).⁴²⁸ Thus it would mean 'mover of the mind', 'stirrer of the mind' or something alike. Apart from its mention in *Skáldskaparmál* the name occurs only twice in Eddic poetry and once in Einarr skálaglamm's poem *Vellekla* (preserved as part of Snorri's *Edda*) and never again in the whole Old Norse corpus. The two instances in which it occurs in the *Poetic Edda* are the previously mentioned stanzas, *Hávamál* 107 and 140. In the first one, Óðinn says few lacks to the wise as "*þvíat Óðrerir / er nú upp kominn á alda vés iaðar.*"⁴²⁹ (because Óðrerir has now come up to the sanctuaries of men.) In this case, Óðrerir seems to refer to the mead itself and not to its container. Then, in stanza 140, when his uncle gives him a drink of the *dýrr miqðr*, Óðinn says that it was "*ausinn Óðreri*"⁴³⁰ (poured from Óðrerir) and therefore it refers the name of the container. In the critical apparatus to his edition of *Skáldskaparmál* Faulkes argues that "Óðrerir apparently refers to the contents of the pot, which accords better with the etymology, though in *Hávamal* 140 it refers to the container."⁴³¹ In contrast, in his edition of *Hávamál*, D. Evans comments, regarding stanza 140, that

ausinn Óðreri is difficult. *Ausa* commonly means 'sprinkle', with the dat. of that which is sprinkled (e.g. *ausa barn vatni*). We might therefore take *ausinn* here as nom. to agree with *ek*, and *Óðreri* as referring to the mead itself (as apparently in [*Hávamál*] 107).⁴³²

⁴²⁸ Anthony Faulkes, 'Glossary and Index of Names', in *Edda: Skáldskaparmál* 2, 2 vols, ed. by Anthony Faulkes (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1998), *óðreyrir*.

⁴²⁹ *Háv* 107.

⁴³⁰ *Háv* 140.

⁴³¹ Faulkes, 'Glossary', p. 497.

⁴³² David A.H. Evans, 'Commentary', in *Hávamál*, ed. by David A.H. Evans (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1986), pp. 75-157 (p. 135).

Regarding stanza 107, in which Óðrerir is also mentioned D. Evans states:

Óðrerir is, in Snorri's account, one of the three vessels in which the sacred mead is stored by Suttungr⁴³³, and this is evidently also the sense it has in 140 below. Here it would seem rather to denote the mead itself; probably this was the original sense of the word, and its application to the vessel containing it is secondary, for it appears to be compounded from *óðr* 'soul; poetry' and **hrærir*, agent noun from *hræra* 'to stir up'[...] thus, 'stirrer-up of the soul (or, of poetry)'.⁴³⁴

Finally, in *Vellekla*, Einarr's reference to Óðrerir seems to allude to the mead itself and not to the container:

Eisar vágr fyrir vísa, verk Ragnis mér hagna,
*þýr Óðreris alda aldr hafis við fles galdra.*⁴³⁵

(Wave of time's sea rushes before the prince.
Rognir's [Óðinn's] deeds benefit me. Swell of
Óðrerir pounds against song's skerry [teeth].)⁴³⁶

In spite of the disagreement over Óðrerir referring to the container or the contents (though Evans' argument for it referring to the contents seems to have a more solid base), the evidence we gather from these fragments does not link the mead Óðrerir to the mead of poetry nor to Óðrerir, the container, that Snorri talks about in *Skáldskaparmál*.⁴³⁷

The links between these references to Óðrerir, the passages involving Óðinn and the mead in *Hávamál*, and Snorri's account of the mead of poetry seem to be due to a tendency among scholars to interpret Eddic poetry taking Snorri as a point of departure for their interpretation.⁴³⁸ We shall have to keep in mind that Snorri was not the transmitter of a unique corpus of ancient lore referring to a unified mythological belief, which was not possible in an oral culture covering such an extensive area as the Old

⁴³³ Though it is stored in the three containers, Són, Boðn and Óðrerir by the dwarves Fjalarr and Galarr and not by Suttungr. See *Sksp* 57.

⁴³⁴ Evans, Commentary, p. 121.

⁴³⁵ *Sksp* 3.

⁴³⁶ Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, ed. and trans. by Faulkes, p. 71.

⁴³⁷ As for the other two containers of the mead, Són and Boðn, mentioned by Snorri, Roberta Frank comments that "None of these container names is mentioned again in skaldic verse until the thirteenth century, when Snorri's brother, Sighvatr Sturluson (ca. 1238), and Gizurr Þorvaldsson (ca. 1254) borrow two of the vat names [i.e. Són and Boðn] from Snorri's handbook and use them in poetry kennings." Frank, 'Snorri and the Mead', p. 161.

⁴³⁸ For example, see Lars Lönnroth, 'Skaldemjödöt i Berget', in *Skaldemjödöt i Berget: Essayer om Fornisländsk Ordkonst och dess Återanvändning i Nutiden* (Stockholm: Atlantis, 1996), pp. 9-34; Stephens, p. 259-68; Frank, 'Snorri and the Mead', pp. 155-70; and Evans, 'Commentary', pp. 135-230.

Norse religion did. Regarding this faith in the reliability of Snorri's *Edda* as a de-codifying tool for more ancient verse, I agree with Svava Jakobsdóttir in her criticism that

Most scholars and interpreters of *Hávamál* are confident that Snorri's account is a reasonably reliable source concerning the relations between Gunnlǫð and Óðinn, and that we may therefore refer to it to explain the more obscure aspects of *Hávamál* [...] The belief that sts. 104-110 tell how Óðinn acquires the mead by seducing Gunnlǫð, even though there is in fact no evidence for it, is remarkably tenacious. Most scholars avail themselves of this explanation whenever the mead of poetry is mentioned, as if it were irrefutably proven, and yet neither account has been fully explained.⁴³⁹

This seems to apply not only to the way in which the Gunnlǫð-Óðinn relationship has been approached, but also to the interpretation of the verses containing some elements that seem to allude to the mead of poetry recorded in Snorri's *Edda*. Accordingly, Evans stretches the meaning of Óðrerir from being the 'stirrer-up of the soul' to being the 'stirrer-up of poetry'. It is easy to see mead, or for that matter any other alcoholic beverage, as a 'stirrer-up of the soul', but to turn it into a 'stirrer-up of poetry' one would require Snorri's account as a background. It seems that the mere mention of Óðrerir or a *dýrr miqðr* tends to make scholars think about the mead of poetry. This might be due to the popularity of Snorri's work.

In an earlier stage of the myth, Óðrerir might have denoted the mead itself. Later, it might have become associated with the gift of poetry, perhaps due to the connection with the main arena in which skalds recited their poems - the drinking halls. What we are contemplating in these fragments are, perhaps, several different stages in the development of one myth, and there is no need to unify them all in order to arrive at a single story which might have never existed in a consolidated form.

Let us proceed to the third occasion in which the myth of the mead is narrated. This occurs in the section of the *Hávamál* known as the *Gnomic Poem*, which, as

⁴³⁹ Svava Jakobsdóttir, 'Gunnlǫð and the Precious Mead', in *The Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Mythology*, ed. by Paul Acker and others (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 30-57 (pp. 30-31).

mentioned before, is considered to be among the oldest surviving pieces of Eddic poetry. The narrator in this section of the poem is Óðinn, and he tells the story in the following words:

11.- *Byrði betri berrat maðr brauto at
en sé manvit mikit;
vegnest verra vegra hann velli at,
en sé ofdryccia qls.*

(11. – No better burden can a man carry on the road than a store of common sense; worse journey-provisions can he not carry on the field than to become drunk on ale.)

12.- *Era svá gott, sem gott qveða,
ql alda sona;
þvíat færa veit, er fleira dreccr,
sins til geðs gumi.*

(12.- It is not so good, as good it is said to be, ale for the sons of men; because the less he knows, he who drinks more, about the mind of men.)

13.- *Óminnis hegri heitir sá er yfir qlórum þrumir,
hann stelr geði guma;
þess fugls fjqðrom ec fitraðr varc
í garði Gunnlaðar.*

(13.- The heron of oblivion is called, that which hovers over the ale-drinking. He steals the minds of men; I was fettered in this bird's feathers (shape) at Gunnlað's court.)

14.- *Qlr ec varð, varð ofrqlvi,
at ins fróða Fjalars;
því er qlðr bazt, at apr uf heimtir
hverr sitt geð gumi.⁴⁴⁰*

(14.- Drunk I was, I became more than drunk, at wise Fjalarr's place; the best thing about ale-drinking is when, afterwards, each man recovers his mind.)

In contrast to the other two versions of the myth, in this fragment Óðinn finds himself at the hall of a dwarf instead of that of a *Jqtunn*. Fjalarr is mentioned among the dwarves in *Vqluspá* 16 (he is also one of the dwarves who kills Kvasir and brews the mead of poetry out of his blood according to Snorri's account) and is also the name of a being, most probably a *Jqtunn*, in *Hárbarðsljóð* 26. Turville-Petre comments that

⁴⁴⁰ Háv 11-14.

The name Fjalar is occasionally applied to giants, but since, according to Snorri, it was also the name of a dwarf who brewed the mead, we may suppose that the author of these lines [i.e. Snorri in his *Skáldskaparmál*] knew a version of the myth in which Óðinn had won the mead from the dwarves.⁴⁴¹

However the fragment could be interpreted in several different ways. It could refer to two different occasions in which Óðinn found himself under the influence of alcohol (once at the court of Gunnlǫð, in stanza 13, and once at Fjalarr's, in stanza 14), as examples of his teaching about the negative effects of drinking in stanzas 11 and 12. Apart from the mention of Gunnlǫð added to the myth of the mead of poetry as recounted in *Skáldskaparmál* and a probable (albeit unlikely) confusion between Fjalarr and Suttungr,⁴⁴² there is nothing that links stanzas 13 and 14 except the moral context of the fragment about the disadvantages of the excessive consumption of alcohol. Seen in this way, this pair of stanzas would fit perfectly with both the preceding and following stanzas as two different examples of the ways in which a man can make a fool of himself.

This group of stanzas, in which the only references to Óðinn's drunkenness are made, seem to be in contradiction to the idea of the mead of poetry. First of all, in *Hávamál*'s stanza 12 Óðinn introduces *ql*⁴⁴³ as being something bad to consume and not very recommendable as it takes away men's wits, which is in opposition to the idea of the drink which confers wisdom and poetic diction. This statement seems to be supported by his own experience in stanzas 13 and 14, in which he becomes forgetful, as the *óminnis hegri* (heron of oblivion) takes over him. Also, the result of alcohol consumption is Óðinn's drunkenness and not the acquisition of wisdom. The fragment then ends by stating that the best of drinking is when men are able to recover their wits. This is also in contrast with the enlightening beverage portrayed by Snorri, as the

⁴⁴¹ Turville-Petre, p. 37.

⁴⁴² Larrington, Carolyne, 'Explanatory Notes', in *The Poetic Edda*, trans. by Carolyne Larrington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 264- 297 (p. 304, *Fjalar*) and; *DNM, Fjalar*.

⁴⁴³ The fact that the drink in question is said to be *ql* and not *mjqðr* may be due either to metric and alliteration requisites that did not allow the poet to use the noun *mjqðr* or to the fact that the beverage being discussed is *ql*, thus the passage would not have any connections with the myth of mead.

beverage portrayed by Snorri has the ability to turn men into poets and scholars, while the one mentioned in *Hávamál* 14 seems to have the opposite effect: it makes men lose their minds. Regarding the contradiction between these stanzas and Snorri's account, Oddgeir Hoftun comments that in stanza 14 "*dette kan ha å gjøre med øl – eller mjøddriking som ikke var kultisk, altså et svirelag der drikken ikke var brygget og viet som skaldedrikk eller til andre spesielt rituelle formal.*"⁴⁴⁴ (This can be related with a mead or mead-drinking that was not cultic; therefore the brew drunk there was not brewed and given as a poetic-drink or was destined for another ritual activity.) On the same line of thought, Tove Lyngra says that the ale Óðinn talks about in stanza 12 "*refereres til andre steder [and] må være av en mer profane karakter.*"⁴⁴⁵ (refers to another episode [and] must be of a more profane character.) In any case, stanzas 11-14 must refer to a stage in the development of the myth of the gaining of alcoholic beverages in which they were not yet connected with wisdom, in which drinking led to a great hangover instead of to a great knowledge.

Seen in a more conventional way, these stanzas could also be interpreted as part of the myth of the mead of poetry. In order to do this one would have to overlook the fact that Fjalarr actually means Suttungr; that by drinking, in stanza 14, Óðinn becomes more than drunk (*ofrqlvi*) instead of gaining wisdom from the ingestion of the brew (which is said to be ale instead of mead, as mead is never mentioned in the two stanzas) and; that in stanza 13 Óðinn is rendered witless and forgetful instead of being endowed with wisdom and poetic diction, as a result of drinking the ale (not mead) at Gunnlǫð's court. If we overlook these details, then we are left with the fact that in stanza 13 Óðinn is taken over by *óminnis hegri*, the heron of oblivion. This bird, as Ursula Dronke suggests, is usually used as a reference to drunkenness due both to its ecstatic

⁴⁴⁴ Hoftun, p. 265.

⁴⁴⁵ Tove Lyngra, 'Rusdrikk og Kunnskap i Norrøn Myte', *Chaos: Dansk-Norsk Tidsskrift for Religionshistoriske Studier*, 23 (1995), 22-31 (p. 22).

appearance while hunting and its vomiting as a way of defence and feeding its young.⁴⁴⁶ As the vomiting abilities of the bird and the mention of Gunnlǫð in the same stanza are the only connections with the myth of the mead as recounted in Snorri's *Edda*, I will leave the analysis of this fragment for the following section, so as to contrast it with *Skáldskaparmál*'s version of the myth.

3.1.3 - GAINING THE MEAD OF POETRY

The fourth, and youngest, account of the myth about gaining the mead was written by Snorri Sturluson in his *Skáldskaparmál* sometime in the early thirteenth century, though the oldest surviving manuscript is dated to the early fourteenth century.⁴⁴⁷ Snorri was acquainted with *Hávamál* and indeed quoted some verses of it in order to explain his rendering of the myth. According to Snorri, after the dwarves Fjalarr and Galarr brew the mead out of Kvasir's blood they store it in the vessels named Óðrerir, Boðn and Són. As mentioned above, they go on a fishing trip with Gilligr (a *Jǫtunn*) who accidentally drowns. Fjalarr kills his widow because he cannot stand her weeping and the dwarves offer Suttungr, Gilligr's son, the mead of poetry as compensation. Suttungr takes the mead and puts it in a place called *Hnitbjǫrg* and sets Gunnlǫð, his daughter, as its guardian. Snorri then explains that "*Af þessu kǫllum vér skáldskap Kvasis blóð eða dverga drekku eða fylli eða nakkvars konar lǫg Óðreris eða Boðnar eða Sónar farskost dverga [...] eða Suttunga mjǫð eða Hnitbjarga lǫgr*".⁴⁴⁸ (Because of this we call poetry Kvasir's blood or drink of dwarves or the content or some kind of liquid of Óðrerir or of Boðn or of Són, or dwarves' transportation [..] or Suttungr's mead or the liquid of Hnitbjǫrg.) This is the point at which both Snorri's and

⁴⁴⁶ Ursula Dronke, 'Óminnis Hegri', in *Festskrift til Ludvig Holm-Olsen på hans 70-Årsdag den 9 Juni 1984*, (Øvre Ervik: Alvheim & Eide, 1984), pp. 53-60.

⁴⁴⁷ The text in the oldest manuscript (De la Gardie) seems to have been greatly altered, thus most editions are based on the *Codex Regius*, dated to the first half of the fourteenth century, and believed to be the closest one to the original. See Anthony Faulkes, 'Snorra Edda', in *Medieval Scandinavia*, ed. by Pulsiano, pp. 600-602.

⁴⁴⁸ *Sksp* 57.

Hávamál's 104-10 accounts are said to meet. Next we are told that Óðinn sets off on an expedition in order to steal the mead. He calls himself Bqlverkr (mischief-causer) and takes lodging with Baugi, Suttungr's brother, where he performs the work of nine slaves for a whole summer in exchange for one drink of the mead. Once the summer passes Óðinn and Baugi go to Suttungr to ask him for the drink but he refuses to give him even a single drop of it. So Óðinn produces an auger called *Rati* and drills a hole into the mountain (presumably *Hnitbjqrg*) so he can go in after assuming the shape of a snake. Once in there, he goes to where *Gunnlqð* is and stays with her for three nights, after which she allows him to drink three draughts of the mead. Óðinn empties each of the containers - Óðrerir, Són and Boðn - with each draught and then escapes assuming the shape of an eagle (*arnarhamr*). Then Suttungr adopts an eagle shape too, and chases him. When both eagles approach Ásgarðr, the Æsir set out in the yard an imprecise number of vat(s) where Óðinn "spýtti hann upp miðinum í kerin"⁴⁴⁹ (spat out the mead in the vats),⁴⁵⁰ but in the chase he realizes that Suttungr is getting close to him, so he releases part of the mead through his rear end. The mead he spits is collected "en Suttunga mjqð gaf Óðinn Ásunum ok þeim mqnnum er yrkja kunnu"⁴⁵¹ (and Óðinn gave Suttungr's mead to the Æsir and to the men who have the knowledge to compose poetry) while the one he excreted is left for anyone to collect, and is called "skáldfifla hlut"⁴⁵² (fool-poets' share).

In contrast to *Hávamál* 104-10, where the wooing of *Gunnlqð* seems to be the main focus of the story, in Snorri's account the mead occupies a central role. Also, in the final chase, Suttungr's sole objective seems to be the recovery of the coveted mead which was not offered freely by him, and not avenging the sorrows of *Gunnlqð*, as is the case in *Hávamál* 109 and 110. As a matter of fact, the mead of poetry occupies such

⁴⁴⁹ *Skspn* G58, p. 5.

⁴⁵⁰ In spite of the fact that the verb is clearly "spýta" (spit) it is commonly assumed that Óðinn actually vomited the mead, as will be discussed below.

⁴⁵¹ *Skspn* G58, p. 5.

⁴⁵² *Skspn* G58, p. 5.

a focal role that Snorri forgets to tell us what happened to the *jǫtunn* once the pursuit came to an end because he concentrates only on telling the fate of the mead.

Snorri seems to have used a source very similar to *Hávamál* 104-10 in order to explain the myth. First, in Snorri's account Óðinn calls himself *Bǫlverkr* in his expedition to gain the mead. The name, meaning 'mischief-causer', bears some resemblance to the results of his excursion in *Hávamál*, as in the poem he brings grief to the realm of the *Jǫtnar* with the beguiling of Gunnlǫð. There are three different reasons that may explain why Óðinn is called *Bǫlverkr* in Snorri's account. First, it can be due to the re-use of of *Hávamál* 109, where the *Jǫtnar* arrive at Óðinn's hall in order to find if the 'mischief-causer' was among the *Æsir* so that "at *bǫlverki þeir spurðu*"⁴⁵³ (they ask for the 'mischief-causer'). In Old Norse manuscripts, it is very atypical to find capitalization, even in proper names. So, in the manuscript of the *Codex Regius* of the *Poetic Edda*, it is possible to read both 'at *Bǫlverki þeir spurðu*' and 'at *bǫlverki þeir spurðu*'. In the first instance, *Bǫlverkr* would be unmistakably a proper name for Óðinn. As a matter of fact, Óðinn lists '*Bǫlverkr*' as one of his names in *Grímnismál* 47. However, if we read '*bǫlverkr*' it can be interpreted as an noun, and thus the *Jǫtnar* could have arrived at the hall looking for the 'mischief-causer' and not for a specific person under that name. The fact that *Grímnismál* lists it as a personal name does not necessarily mean that they were looking for someone under that name, as the noun could have well been assigned to Óðinn at a later stage, perhaps as a result of his dealings with Gunnlǫð. Two different possibilities arise from this fact: Snorri had access to the poem either orally or in a written way. If it was transmitted orally, Snorri could have mistaken the adjective *bǫlverkr* for a proper noun; if Snorri had access to a written version of the myth, he could have interpreted *bǫlverkr* as *Bǫlverkr*, turning the adjective into a name. The result, in any case, is the same as *bǫlverkr* becomes a proper

⁴⁵³ *Háv* 109.

name in *Skáldskaparmál*. Regarding Snorri's particular use (and creation of personal names) Roberta Frank argues that "the euhemeristic determination of Snorri and his predecessors to uncover meaning in *fornar kenningar* could have led to a proliferation of such mythological figures as Kvasir, Boðn, Són, and Gillingr and to stories lending them legitimacy."⁴⁵⁴

Frank's argument leads to the second possible origin of *bqlverkr* as a personal name in *Skáldskaparmál*, namely the fact that Snorri created a name out of the noun. There is enough evidence to believe that the names of the mead-containers in his account of the myth were nouns raised to the status of proper names⁴⁵⁵ and there exists the possibility that he did the same with the noun *bqlverkr*. The same applies in the case of *rati*, the name of the auger Óðinn used in order to get into Hnitbjörg. In *Skáldskaparmál* we are told that the auger was called Rati, while in *Hávamál* 106 it is said that he used a nameless *rati* (auger) for the same purpose. Again, Snorri seems to have turned a noun into a proper name, just as he might have done with the name Kvasir, as discussed above.

Thus the soundest explanation is that in Snorri's re-creation of the myth there were reminiscences of an earlier stage of the myth in which the stealing of the mead was considered an 'evil' act, which made Óðinn gain the name of Bqlverkr, instead of the heroic task which Snorri portrays.

3.2 - DRINKING IN ÁSGARÐR

Among the drinking scenes portrayed in *Eddic* literature only a few take place in Ásgarðr; so as to make one believe that there was no longstanding drinking tradition in the realm of the gods. There are, however, several occasions in which drinking and drinking customs in Ásgarðr are hinted at in the texts. In this section I will try to draw

⁴⁵⁴ Frank, 'Snorri and the Mead', p. 158.

⁴⁵⁵ See Frank, 'Snorri and the Mead', p. 161.

some meaning out of these fragments in order to find information about the drinking culture in the afterlife with the gods. These fragments can be grouped into those which make reference to the producers of the drink, to those who pour the drink, to those who drink it, and to the place in which the drinking takes place.

3.2.1- SOURCES OF ALCOHOL IN ÁSGARÐR

According to the material preserved in both *Eddas* there seem to be only two sources for the alcohol that is consumed in Ásgarðr. One is the previously mentioned mead that Óðinn stole from the Jqtnar. The second source of mead is Heiðrún, a goat that lives on the roof of Valhǫll, from whose udders enough mead flows to ensure that the *einherjar* are never thirsty. Heiðrún's myth is preserved both in the Eddic poem *Grímnismál* and in Snorri's *Edda*, though the account in this last source seems to be influenced by the one in *Grímnismál*. In *Grímnismál*, probably composed in its actual rendering at the end of the tenth century and preserved in the *Codex Regius* of the *Poetic Edda* and in the manuscript AM 748 I 4to, Óðinn tells us that:

*Heiðrún heitir geit, er stendr hǫllo á Heriafǫðrs
oc bitr af Læraðs limom;
skapker fylla hón scal ins scira miaðar,
knáat sú veig vanaz.*⁴⁵⁶

(Heiðrún is the name of the goat that stands over the hall of Heriafǫðr [Óðinn] and bites from Læraðr's foliage; a vat she shall fill with bright mead, that beverage cannot be exhausted.)

Snorri's account of the myth does not add much information to what we know from *Grímnismál*, as he tells us that "*Geit sú er Heiðrún heitir stendr uppi á Valhǫll ok bitr barr af limum trés þess er mjǫk er nafnfrægt er Læraðr heitir, en ór spenum hennar rennr mjǫðr sá er hon fyllir skapker hvern dag. Þat er svá mikit at allir einherjar verða fulldruknir af.*"⁴⁵⁷ (There is a goat called Heiðrún that stands on top of Valhǫll and bites the foliage of the tree that is very famous and that is called Læraðr, and from her udder mead flows so that she fills a vat each day. This is so much that all the *einherjar* can

⁴⁵⁶ *Grm* 25.

⁴⁵⁷ *Gylf* 39, p. 33.

drink their fill from it.) Snorri seems to be paraphrasing the poem⁴⁵⁸ and all his rendering adds is the fact that this mead was intended for the consumption of the *einherjar*. So for the purposes of this section I will consider both accounts as the same version of the myth.⁴⁵⁹ Heiðrún also appears listed as a name for a goat in *Skáldskaparmál*, stanza 509. She makes a further appearance in the Eddic poem *Hyndluljóð* as a reference for Freyja's lasciviousness. For the moment let us focus on the fact that there is, in Valhǫll, a goat that produces an infinite amount of mead.

There have been several attempts to disentangle the etymology of the name Heiðrún, as it is unclear where the name is derived from. Old Norse *heiðr* can be interpreted as an adjective, meaning 'bright' or 'cloudless'; as a masculine noun meaning 'honour', or as a feminine noun meaning 'heath'.⁴⁶⁰ The first two readings could be applied to mead. As an adjective it could refer to mead as being bright, just as *skírr* (clear, bright, pure) is otherwise used to describe it. The meaning 'honour' could be also attached to mead, as being the drink of noblemen or as part of the honour of being with the *einherjar* drinking it in Valhǫll. Thus, these two readings of the name would refer to *heiðr* as a quality of the product, not of the producer. The third reading, though, would make more reference to the goat itself than to the mead, as goats would be expected to graze on the heath.

Liberman argues that the first two possibilities are quite plausible, stating that *heiðr* would mean either "bright sky (then Heiðrún is a heavenly she-goat) [or...]clear

⁴⁵⁸ In the chapters preceding *Gylf* 39 Snorri quotes several stanzas from *Grm*. In chapters 36 to 38 he quotes stanzas 38, 18, 19 and 20. In chapter 40 he quotes stanzas 23, 24 and 44. Thus, while creating this section of his book Snorri had the poem *Grm* as a background, which leads me to believe that his rendering of Heiðrún's myth is just a paraphrase of *Grm* 25.

⁴⁵⁹ Liberman comments that in some manuscripts of Snorri's *Edda* instead of mead Heiðrún is said to produce milk; see Anatoly Liberman, 'The Origin of the Eddic Animal Names Heiðrún and Eikþyrnir', *General Linguistics*, 28:1 (1988), 32-48 (p. 32). However, as he does not list the manuscripts in which this appears and none of the consulted editions of Snorri's *Edda* mention this fact, it was impossible to confirm and analyze this fact.

⁴⁶⁰ *IED*, *heiðr* and *OGNS*, *heiðr*. See also *IEW*, *heiðr* and *AEW*, *heiðr*; they provide exactly the same translations as those in *IED* and *OGNS*.

used specifically about mead or milk, or it simply means ‘sacrificial drink’”.⁴⁶¹ Even if these readings clarify the etymologies of the name Heiðrún, they leave us with the problem of the name-choice. As Liberman states:

Bugge was right in stating that on the face of it Heiðrún is a singularly inappropriate name for a goat. No other female animal in the *Edda* has a name ending in *-rún* [...] A giantess, a valkyrie, or a character from heroic poetry could have been called Heiðrún, but not a goat.⁴⁶²

This is, taking into consideration considering that female names ending in *-rún* are usually those of *Jqtunn*-women and valkyries. Valkyries, whose function was among others to serve mead to the *einherjar*⁴⁶³, can be somehow connected with a mead-providing goat while, based on the ending *-rún*, Else Mundal has argued that “*Namnet skil seg ut ved at namneelementa ikke er slike som ein elles finn at i dei mytologiske dyrenamna, men derimot i personnamna, og då særskilt i mytologiske personnamn som har tilknytning til jotunverda.*”⁴⁶⁴ (the name differentiates itself because the name-elements are not like the ones one finds in the mythological animal-names, but on the contrary one finds them in personal names that have a connection with Jqtunheim.) As we will see, Heiðrún’s similarities to the *Jqtunar* seem to be more complex than her name-ending. However a third possibility arises, as John McKinnell has shown in his 2001 article “On Heiðr”, the name Heiðr is attributed to *vqlur* (seeresses) who are invited to prophesy at feasts. One of the characteristics shared by most of these *vqlur* is that they “may be of an alien origin connected with the far north – a Lapp [...] or a giantess.”⁴⁶⁵ Even though the aim of McKinnell’s article is to identify the narrator in *Vqluspá*, his arguments cast some light on the fact that in Old Norse mentality the name Heiðr was associated with *vqlur*, *Jqtunn*-women or Lapps, and thus Heiðrún not only has another link with personal names but also with persons connected to magic, as was

⁴⁶¹ Liberman, p. 35.

⁴⁶² Liberman, p. 36.

⁴⁶³ On this role of the valkyries, see section 3.2.3.

⁴⁶⁴ Else Mundal, ‘Heiðrún: Den Mjød mjølkande Geita på Valhalls Tak’, in *Eyvindarbók: Festskrift til Eyvind Fjeld Halvorsen, 4 Mai 1992*, ed. by Finn Hødnebo and others (Oslo: Institutt for Nordistikk og Literaturvitenskap, 1992), pp. 240-47 (p. 242).

⁴⁶⁵ John McKinnell, ‘On Heiðr’, *Saga-Book*, 25: 4 (2001), 394-417 (p. 398).

the case of the *Jqtnar*. Accordingly, *IEW* explains the name Heiðrún as “*die eine rune besitzt, die hoch in ehren gehalten wird, d.h. die eine herrliche magische gabe hat*”⁴⁶⁶ (the one who owns runes, is held in honour, i.e. who has a marvellous magical gift). *AEW* renders it as “*die ein herrliches geheimnis besitzt*”⁴⁶⁷ (she who possesses a marvellous secret). These definitions add to the interpretation of the goat as a being that possesses some magical gifts. Even if this is seen as reference to the religious or cultic use of mead, there are not enough elements to support such an opinion.

Léraðr, the tree from which Heiðrún grazes and which grows from Valhǫll could be identified with the world-tree Yggdrasill. If such is the case then, while consuming it in order to quench the thirst of the *einherjar*, Heiðrún would be also contributing to its decay and therefore to Ragnarǫk. Mundal suggests that this situation is doubly grim as “*den dystre bakgrunn for det lystige livet i Valhal er at for kvar sup mjød einherjane tek, drikk dei seg nærmere til Ragnarok.*”⁴⁶⁸ (the gloomy background of this cheerful life in Valhǫll is that for each draught of mead that the *einherjar* take, they drink themselves closer to Ragnarǫk.) In this case Heiðrún would also have a role similar to that of the *Jqtnar*, who sometimes collaborate with the *Æsir* but will also prompt and fight against them at Ragnarǫk.

The last appearance of Heiðrún in the Old Norse corpus occurs during the confrontation between Freyja and the dead *Jqtunn*-woman Hyndla in the Eddic poem *Hyndluljóð*. This poem, which is usually dated to the twelfth century and preserved only as part of the fourteenth-century *Flateyjarbók*, tells of Freyja’s journey to consult Hyndla in order to gain knowledge about the ancestry of her lover Óttarr and a drink of *minnisql* (memory ale) which will allow Óttarr to remember all the information that he is provided with. When Freyja asks the *Jqtunn*-woman for the drink she replies:

46. - hleypr þú, eðlvina, úti á náttom,

⁴⁶⁶ *IEW, Heiðrún.*

⁴⁶⁷ *AEW, Heiðrún.*

⁴⁶⁸ Mundal, p. 246.

sem með hqfrom *Heiðrún fari.*

(You leap, noble friend, out in the night, as Heiðrún does with he-goats.)

47. - *Rannt at Æði* *ey þreyiandi,*
scutuz þér fleiri *und fyrirscyrto;*
hleypr þú, eðlvina, *úti á náttom,*
sem með hqfrom *Heiðrún fari.*⁴⁶⁹

(You ran towards Óðr full of lust, many have thrust there, under the front of your skirt. You leap, noble friend, out in the night, as with he-goats Heiðrún does.)

It is interesting to note that not only Heiðrún is the first simile that Hyndla finds to insult Freyja after being asked for alcohol, but also that the goat serves as an example of lasciviousness. Freyja's erotic escapades are well known from sagas and Eddic literature, but Heiðrún's are not mentioned elsewhere. The goat's behaviour could well be part of a now-lost myth but could also refer to the sexual patterns of goats, which mate at any time of the year, perhaps turning them into an example of lust. As is well known from saga literature, both the *Jqtnar* and *Jqtunn*-women are linked with a great sexual eagerness. On this Mundal comments that "*forestillingane on det moralsk lausslepte [of Heiðrún] knyter seg ikke berre til grøderikdomsguddomane, men også til jotumaktene. Om denne geita som beiter fredelag på taket til Valhall, skulle vise seg å vere ein representant for jotunmaktene...*"⁴⁷⁰ (the representation of the moral looseness [of Heiðrún] does not have links only to fertility, but also to the *Jqtnar*'s might. If this goat that bites peacefully at Valhll's roof should be interpreted as being a representative of the *Jqtnar*'s might....)

Even if linking the mead-producing goat to the world of the *Jqtnar* can seem far-fetched, there are several elements shared by both kinds of beings. The first and most important in this context is their role as alcohol-providers for Ásgarðr.⁴⁷¹ But we should also take into account the fact that they are both connected with the coming of

⁴⁶⁹ *Hdl* 46-47.

⁴⁷⁰ Mundal, p. 242.

⁴⁷¹ The role of the *Jqtnar* as the *Æsir*'s main source of alcohol will be discussed in section 3.3.

Ragnarqk and serve as examples of sexual proclivity. Also, if the root *heiðr* in *Heiðrún* is the same as that of the *vqlur*'s names then they would also be linked with magical practices.⁴⁷²

Whether the goat is related to the *Jqtnar* or not is a question that might have no answer. But one shall bear in mind that the only attested external sources for alcohol in *Ásgarðr* are the *Jqtnar* while *Heiðrún* is the only source of alcohol within *Ásgarðr*. This might indicate a lack of brewing in the realm of the gods. This does not necessarily imply that the *Æsir* did not know how to brew, just that there is no evidence of brewing or the equipment needed for brewing among the gods. There is only one source that links the *Æsir* with brewing. This occurs in the previously mentioned late thirteenth- or early fourteenth century brewing competition in *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka*,⁴⁷³ where the contestants request the help of the gods in order to produce the *ql*. Even if the *Æsir* contribute by adding their saliva to the dreg, it does not prove that they knew how to brew; at most this episode can give us some ethnographic evidence about the contemporary practices involved in brewing, using the wild yeasts contained in saliva. This is the only episode in which the *Æsir* are actively involved in brewing, but as it forms part of a late saga and of an episode with a strong Christian view on marriage, we cannot consider it as a proof of an actual pre-Christian belief that the *Æsir* did know how to brew.

Even if we take as given that the *Æsir* did not master any brewing techniques, a question arises from *Heiðrún*'s endless mead-production: 'why did Óðinn undertake a

⁴⁷² There exists, however, the possibility that the goat's name has a manifold meaning, as Liberman argues: "The form *Heiðrún* concealed several highly appropriate puns. First of all it made one think of the sky (*heið*) and valkyries (*-rún*), i.e. of Valhalla. Secondly it evoked the idea of a sacrificial mead [...] The root *-rún*, with a short vowel, had other ties with words for cattle. A wild, i.e. uncastrated, boar was called *runi*, presumably from *renna*, 'be in heat' [...] It may be not for nothing that *Heiðrún* got the reputation for running around with he-goats at night [...] Finally it is hard to imagine that the poet who made up the name *Heiðrún* did not hear that it sounded very much like the Latin word *haedus* 'goat.'" Liberman, pp. 40-41.

⁴⁷³ *Hálf I*, p. 93.

journey to steal mead from the *Jqtnar* if on his own roof he had such a goat as Heiðrún?' Oddgeir Hoftun poses this question and comments that

det kan synes underlig at Odin måte sette så mye inn på å skaffe guddommene den mjøden Suttung hadde, når han på taket av sitt eget Valhall hadde Heiðrún som melket mjød i bøtter og spann. Men det er egentlig ikke en myte om hvordan Odin fikk skaffet seg mjød, men om hvordan Óðinn skaffet guder og mennesker visdom.⁴⁷⁴

(it can seem strange that Óðinn must go through so much in order to obtain for the gods the mead that Suttungr had, while on the roof of his own Valhǫll he had Heiðrún, who produced large amounts of mead. But this is not actually the myth about how Óðinn got hold of mead, but it is the myth about how Óðinn acquired wisdom for gods and men.)

Hoftun seems to be right in questioning the motivations of the journey if the result of such an expedition was only to gain mead, which was already abundant in Valhǫll. We shall, however, remember that we are dealing with a mythology which did not follow a unique plot. Accordingly we shall not expect a system in which everything must follow a strict cause-effect and chronological order.⁴⁷⁵ It is indeed not clear why Óðinn would set out on an expedition to gain just plain mead while he already had plenty of it at home. Hoftun argues that Óðinn's journey was due to the fact that Suttungr's mead was one which conferred wisdom. Assuming that the original mead which Óðinn stole from the *Jqtnar* was indeed one capable of transmitting the gift of poetry, it would still not be clear why he would go through the pains of acquiring it while at home there was already a god of poetry, i.e. Bragi? Would it not be easier to ask Bragi to allow someone to become a poet? The explanation might be that mythologems, which are a set of repeated symbolical patterns, can have different roles and interpretations within the same system of beliefs. The question of 'why Óðinn crossed the world in order to steal the mead?' may not have an actual answer if one follows the logic that he already owned mead and poetry in Ásgarðr. Perhaps Heiðrún's myth belongs to a later or earlier stage in the development of Norse mythology; perhaps it belongs to a different tradition. In any case, myths do not necessarily have a logical explanation for the acts they describe.

⁴⁷⁴ Hoftun, p. 255.

⁴⁷⁵ On this topic see M.I. Steblin-Kamenskij, *Myth: The Icelandic Sagas and Eddas*, trans. by Mary P. Coote (Ann Arbor: Karoma, 1982), pp. 46-68.

As for drinking within Ásgarðr, there seems to be plenty of evidence to prove that it occurred, even if within the Eddic texts we have only one scene in which drinking actually takes place in Ásgarðr.⁴⁷⁶ This involves Hrungnir, a *Jqtunn* who arrives in Valhǫll after chasing Qðinn. When he arrives at the hall “*buðu Æsir honum til drykkju. Hann gekk í hǫllina ok bað fá sér drykkju [...] En er hann gerðisk drukkinn þá skorti eigi stór orð*”⁴⁷⁷ (the Æsir invited him to a drink. He went into the hall and asked to be served a drink [...] And when he became drunk then he did not lack big words) so that he acts insolently against the gods, and after several threats he “*drekka lézk hann mundu alt Ása qrl*”⁴⁷⁸ (threatens that he will drink all the Æsir’s ale). It is only at this point that the Æsir call upon Þórr to get rid of the *Jqtunn*. This situation is in some ways similar to that of Óðinn going to Jqtunheim in order to drink all of Suttungr’s mead, perhaps attesting a feud between Æsir and *Jqtnar* for the possession of alcoholic beverages.

3.2.2- DRINKING PLACES IN ÁSGARÐR

The Eddic poem *Grímnismál* (stanzas 4-17) provides us with a list of the twelve or thirteen halls owned by the Æsir.⁴⁷⁹ Only in three of these halls do we find references to active drinking, though one cannot discount the likelihood that they were all actually drinking halls. Of these, it was mainly Valhǫll that attracted the attention of the composers of Eddas and sagas, while drinking in the only other two halls in which the ingestion of alcohol is said to take place is limited to a mere reference. Of *Sökkvabekkr* it

⁴⁷⁶ In Snorri’s *Edda* three different drinking scenes within Ásgarðr are described; namely that of Gylfi visiting Valhǫll as part of the frame-story in *Gylfaginning*, that of Ægir in an unspecified hall in Ásgarðr as part of the frame-story in *Skjpm* and, finally that of Hrungnir (a *Jqtunn*) in another unspecified hall in Ásgarðr. However, for the purposes of this chapter the first two scenes will not be taken into account, as they appear to be more Snorri’s creation in order to provide his narrations with a frame-story than the actual transmission of a myth in which king Gylfi and Ægir actually visited the gods. Nevertheless, these scenes provide us with information about what Snorri did actually know about the drinking culture in the realm of the gods, as he might have intended to provide us with a ‘realistic’ account of how was it drunk among the gods. Furthermore, he might have extracted information from other myths (not transmitted in his *Edda*) in order to create such scenes.

⁴⁷⁷ *Skjpm* 17, p. 20.

⁴⁷⁸ *Skjpm* 17, p. 20.

⁴⁷⁹ Namely Þrúðheimr, owned by Þórr; Ýdalir, owned by Ullr; Álheim, owned by Freyr; Valaskjálf, perhaps owned by Óðinn or by Vali (Simek, Rudolf, 1993, Valaskjálf); Sökkvabekkr, owned either by Saga, Óðinn or both; Valhǫll owned by Óðinn; Þrymheimr, owned by Þiazir; Breiðablik, owned by Baldr; Himinbiqrg, owned by Heimdall; Fólkvangr, owned by Freyja; Glitnir, owned by Forseti; Nóatún, owned by Niqrðr and a probable (unnamed) hall owned by Viðarr.

is only said that “*þar þau Óðinn oc Sága drecca um alla daga, / glqð, ór gullnom kerom.*”⁴⁸⁰ (there Óðinn and Sága / drink every day gladly from golden goblets) and of Himinbiqrg it is said: “*þar vqrðr goða dreccr í væro ranni, / glaðr, inn góða miqð*”⁴⁸¹ (there the gods warder / gladly drinks the good mead in the large house.) From these passages we only learn that, in these halls, those who drink do it gladly; but nothing is told about the nature or origin of the drinks there consumed.

There seems to be evidence in the saga corpus for another drinking scene within Ásgarðr. *Eyrbyggja saga* contains a reference to a drinking scene which may have taken place within Þrúdheimr, Þórr’s hall. However it is not described in detail. In it Þorsteinn þorskabítr, son of Þórolfr Mostrarskegg – a great Þórr worshipper - is seen entering the otherworld and being greeted by his dead father. His entrance to the otherworld is attested by a shepherd who describes it in the following words:

*hann sá, at fjallit lausk upp norðan; hann sá inn í fjallit elda stóra ok heyrði þangat mikinn glaum ok hornaskvql; ok er hann hlýddi, ef hann næmi nqkkur orðaskil, heyrði hann, at þar var heilsat Þorsteini þorskabít ok fqrnautum hans ok mælt, at hann skal sitja í qndvegi gegnt feðr sínum.*⁴⁸²

(he saw that the mountain opened on the northern side, he saw great fires inside the mountain and heard a great merriment and noise of horns coming from there; and when he listened to check if he could perceive some conversation he heard that Þorsteinn þorskabitr and his men were being welcomed and said that he [Þorsteinn þorskabitr] should sit at the high-seat opposite to that of his father.)

This scene may reflect two different sets of beliefs. The first of these is that of an afterlife inside a mound or a mountain, as is the case of Helgafell, where Þorsteinn is being welcomed to a feast in the hereafter within Miðgarðr. The second possibility is that, since his father was a great Þórr worshipper and Þorsteinn himself was consecrated to that god at the moment of his birth, what the shepherd actually saw was a brief feasting scene within Þórr’s hall. If this is the case, we are presented with an afterlife in which drink and a social hierarchy – through the allotment of seating places - was commonplace within

⁴⁸⁰ *Grm* 7.

⁴⁸¹ *Grm* 13.

⁴⁸² *Eb* XI, p. 19.

Þrúðheimr; indicating that at least Þórr's hall was also a drinking hall, though with an unattested nature of the beverage consumed in it.

As mentioned above, only Valhǫll attracted the attention of those who committed the Eddas and sagas to writing. This is may be due to the fact that this was Óðinn's hall, who was the god of poetry and those who transmitted the information were probably poets themselves. It can also be due to the fact that Valhǫll was a very honourable place to spend an afterlife, as those who went there were those killed in battle, which in a warrior society must have been considered as a highly esteemed afterlife. According to *Grímnismál* 8-9, Valhǫll is located in a place called Gláðsheimr and it shines like gold. Spear-shafts are used as rafters, shields form its roof and are laid on the benches and there is a wolf on the western doors. However, in Valhǫll's appearance in stanzas 8-10 of *Grímnismál* nothing is said about drinking within it. This information is provided only in different scattered sections of other texts.

According to Snorri, Valhǫll was a place where the most honourable dead went, and they had a drink that was fitting to their rank - mead. When in *Gylfaginning* Gylfi asks if the *einherjar* drank water in Valhǫll, Óðinn replies:

*Undarlíga spyrðu nú at Alfǫðr mun bjóða til sín konungum eða jǫrlum
eða qðrum rikismqnum ok muni gefa þeim vatn at drekka, ok þat veit
trúa mín at margr kemr sá til Valhallar er dýrt mundi þikkjask kaup
vazdrykkin ef eigi væri betra fagnaðar þangat at vitja.*⁴⁸³

(An extraordinary question you ask now, whether if All-father would invite to his place kings or earls or other powerful men and would give them water to drink, and I know by my faith that many that come to Valhalla would think that they have paid a high price to buy a drink of water if there were no better joys to be had)

This passage is followed by the description of Heiðrún and how she provides the *einherjar* with mead. From this passage we learn that mead (and Valhǫll) was a pleasure worthy of kings, earls and other high-standing men, just as wine was to be considered later. An everlasting source of mead was bliss to die for. As a matter of fact,

⁴⁸³ *Gylf*39, p. 33.

fighting, drinking and eating seem to have been the only pleasures to be enjoyed in this hall. In *Gylfaginning*, Óðinn describes the daily activities of the *einherjar* in the following words: “*Hvern dag þá er þeir hafa klæzk þá hervæða þeir sik ok ganga út í garðinn ok berjazk ok fellr hverr á annan. Þat er leikr þeira. Ok er líðr at daggurðarmáli þá riða þeir heim til Valhallar ok setjazk til drikkju.*”⁴⁸⁴ (Each day once they have got dressed they put on their armour and go out to the garth and fight and fell each other. That is their game. And when it gets near to dinner-time then they ride home to Valhǫll and sit to drink.) Drinking and eating seem to have been the only activities held within the hall, while all the violent activities were conducted outside. Most probably the fighting took place outdoors due to the hall’s status as a *gríðastaðr* (sanctuary),⁴⁸⁵ that is, a place where all forms of violence were banned.

The only drink that was consumed in Valhǫll, and apparently in all Ásgarðr, was mead. This fact points towards the high social esteem of this beverage, which came to be considered an otherworldly drink, worthy only of the worthiest of dead men. There is however a reference to the consumption of wine. In *Grímnismál*, Óðinn states that: “*En við vín eitt vápnqfugr / Óðinn æ lifir.*”⁴⁸⁶ (and on wine alone / glorious in arms Óðinn lives.) This passage can be approached in three different ways. First we know that “wine was not a natural drink amongst the Germanic people.”⁴⁸⁷ Thus we can infer that wine, as an exotic drink, was the only drink fit to be drunk by the father of the gods, while the next beverage in the social scale (mead) was reserved for the *einherjar*. Second, taking into consideration that Scandinavia is far north of the grape frontier, one can infer that this mention of wine was a late non-native addition to the text made once the wine import to Scandinavia made it popular but still expensive enough as to be considered as ‘the food of Óðinn’. Finally, one cannot disregard the possibility that *vín* was used as a

⁴⁸⁴ *Gylf* 41, p. 34.

⁴⁸⁵ On Ásgarðr as a *gríðastaðr*, see section 3.3. As we shall see in Chapter 4, this perception of Valhǫll as a sanctuary seems to have been the model for more earthly halls.

⁴⁸⁶ *Grm* 19.

⁴⁸⁷ Lowry, p. 8. Also see section 2.4 in this study.

poetic synonym for mead, just as *ql* or *bjórr* seem to be used in its place whenever alliteration or rhyme conventions require it. Thus the ‘food of Óðinn’ could be mead and not wine. An objection could be made by saying that just as sometimes mead is substituted by *ql*, *bjórr* and perhaps *vín* in poetry, it could also be done the other way around, thus mead could be used as a substitute for any of these other beverages. The possibility exists, and this substitution was most probably done in poetry. But when it comes to prose, where the conventions are not strict as to force the use of ‘poetic synonyms’, mead was not used as a substitute for another term and was held as the drink of highest esteem.

3.2.3- SERVING DRINKS IN ÁSGARÐR

If kings and earls expected to be greeted in Valhǫll with the best of drinks, they also expected service according to their rank. This was provided by the *valkyrjur*.

While enumerating the names and roles of the different Ásynjur, Snorri apparently⁴⁸⁸ interrupts his account in order to state that “*enn eru þær aðrar er þjóna skulu í Valhǫll, bera drykkju ok gæta borðbúnaðar ok qlgagna.*”⁴⁸⁹ (and there are other ones which should serve in Valhǫll, bear drinks and take care of the table service and the drinking vessels⁴⁹⁰.) He then continues “*Þessar heita valkyrjur. Þær sendir Óðinn til hverrar orrostu. Þær kjósa feigð á menn ok ráða sigri.*”⁴⁹¹ (they are called valkyrjur. Óðinn sends them to every battle. They allot death to men and determine victory.) Maybe it is due to the fact that in Eddic literature there are no drinking scenes in Ásgarðr (apart from Hrungrnir’s, where Freyja is the one that pours the drink to the

⁴⁸⁸ I say apparently, as from the context, the Valkyries appear to form part of the Ásynjur for two different reasons. First, after interrupting his listing of the Ásynjur in order to introduce the valkyries he says ‘*enn eru þær aðrar*’ (and there are other ones). This *aðrar* (other ones) seems to imply that the valkyries were ‘other’ Ásynjur. The second reason is that after the brief enumeration of the valkyries, he proceeds with his account of the Ásynjur’s origins, as if he had never interrupted the account. Maybe he did not interrupt the list; this inclusion of the valkyries within the female deities would explain why they do not have a myth attached to their origin, as most supernatural beings do in his *Edda*.

⁴⁸⁹ *Gylf* 36, p. 30.

⁴⁹⁰ Even though *qlgagna* is translated as ‘drinking vessels’ it can be literally translated as ‘*ql*-vessels’.

⁴⁹¹ *Gylf* 36, p. 30.

Jqtunn) that the valkyries never appear in their role as servers at Valhǫll.⁴⁹² In the poem *Grímnismál*, we find another reference to valkyries as servers in Valhǫll. In it, Óðinn recites a series of stanzas (after drinking an unnamed liquid from a horn) in which he provides the court of King Geirrøðr with knowledge about the realm of the Æsir, among which is the following:

*Hrist oc Mist vil ec at mér horn beri,
 Sceggiqlð oc Scqgul,
 Hildi oc Þruði, Hlqcc oc Herfiqtur,
 Gqll oc Geirqlu;l
 Randgríð oc Ráðgríð oc Reginleif,
 þær bera einheriom ql.⁴⁹³*

(Hrist and Mist I want to bear me a horn, Skeggiqlð and Skqgul, Hildir and Þruðr, Hlqkk and Herfiqtur, Gqll and Geirqlul, Randgríðr and Ráðgríðr and Reginleif they bear ale to the *einherjar*)

Snorri quotes this stanza almost verbatim⁴⁹⁴ in his description of the valkyries' activities in *Gylfaginning* 36. But in the Eddas in general, the *valkyrjur* seem to be more concerned about exercising their 'chooser of the slain' activities instead of serving the *einherjar*. However, there are several other references to *valkyrjur* as drink bearers.

The eddic poem *Eiríksmál* composed (c. 960) in honour of Eiríkr *blóðøx* and preserved only in *Fagrskinna*, and only one (the first) stanza in Snorri's *Skáldskaparmál*, gives us a hint of how the drinking was organized at Valhǫll. In the first stanza, Óðinn wakes up from a dream and speaks:

*Hvat er þat drauma? (kvað Óðinn) ek hugðumk fyr dag litlu
 Valhöll ryðja fyr vegnu fólki;
 vakta ek einherja, bað ek upp risa
 bekki at strá, bjórker at leyðra,
 valkyrjur vin bera, sem vísi komi.⁴⁹⁵*

(‘What is that dream?’ said Óðinn ‘I thought that soon before daybreak / I cleared Valhǫll for the slain people. / I woke the *einherjar* up, I bade them rise up, / to strew the benches, to clean the *bjórr*-cups, / [I bade] the *valkyrjur* to carry *vin* as if a leader was coming.’)

⁴⁹² This scene, where Freyja pours drinks for Hrúgnir instead of having one of the *valkyrjur* doing it, reinforces the idea that the *valkyrjur* were considered as being part of the *Asynjur*.

⁴⁹³ *Grm* 36.

⁴⁹⁴ The only difference is that in the 6th line Snorri provides the name Geirahqð in the place of Geirqlul. Rudolf Simek notes that Geirahqð “in several Eddic manuscripts of *Grm* 36 is found instead of Geirqlul. (*DNM*, *Geirahqð*.)

⁴⁹⁵ *Eksm* 1.

The poem not only illustrates the role of the *valkyrjur* as wine bearers but also portrays the *einherjar* as janitors of the hall and as hosts of new guests. Another source attesting this role of the *valkyrjur* as drink-bearers is the Eddic poem *Sigrðrifumál*, preserved in the *Codex Regius* of the *Poetic Edda* and later incorporated in *Vǫlsunga saga*, the prose version of the story. In the poem, the young hero Sigurðr wakens Sigrdrífa, a valkyrie, and asks her to ‘teach him wisdom’. Her answer is in the form of alcohol:

*Biór færi ec þér, brynþings apaldr,
magni blandinn oc megintíri;
fullr er hann lióða oc lícstafa,
góðra galdra oc gamanrúna.⁴⁹⁶*

(Bjórr I bring to you, tree of battle [warrior], / mixed with strength and great fame; / it is full of verses and comfort, / with good magic and merry talk.)

There seems to be just enough literary evidence for the *valkyrjur* serving as maids of warriors. However, their personal names bear etymologies linked more to their role as warriors than to that of drink-bearers. To my knowledge, there are no valkyrie-names which refer to drinking. Accordingly, the main literary role of the *valkyrjur* was that of the choosers of the slain, as their name indicates.

On some Gotlandic picture-stones, there are some illustrations that appear to make references to the entrance of a warrior to the otherworld. And in some of them the warrior is portrayed as being received by a woman who holds a drinking horn for him.

As we can see in the top panel of the Stenkyrka stone, (Figure 3.1) a warrior is being offered a drinking horn by a long-haired woman in his probable entrance to the otherworld. The scene is repeated in the top panel of the Tjängvide stone (Figure 3.2) and in the top panel of the Klinte stone (Figure 3.3) where a warrior, surrounded by other warriors and a dog is also greeted by a lady with a drinking horn. These scenes could be considered, as they traditionally are, as a warrior making his entrance to the otherworld and being welcomed by a *Valkyrie*. Even if these carvings antedate the period with which

⁴⁹⁶ *Sd* 5.

we are concerned, we can well take them as a background for the religious beliefs of the Viking Age and its perception during the Scandinavian Middle Ages.

3.3- THE *ÆSIR*'S QUEST FOR ALCOHOL AMONG THE *JQTNAR*

Apart from being the archetypal adversaries of *Æsir* and men, the *Jqtnar* have several roles in Old Norse mythology. *Jqtunn*-women usually marry or have sexual intercourse with the *Æsir*, while the males of the race struggle to gain control over the *Ásynjur*. They are also associated with origins and ends: *Jqtnar* are, through Ymir, the origin of the world and they bring about its end at Ragnarök; also three *Jqtunn*-women are associated with the end of the Golden Age.⁴⁹⁷ The *Jqtnar* are also linked with wisdom⁴⁹⁸ and in a certain way they contribute to the wellbeing of the *Æsir* since, according to Snorri, it is a *Jqtunn* who builds the walls of Ásgarðr. In general we could say, with Lotte Motz, “the giant is in Scandinavian tradition above all the enemy of cosmic order.”⁴⁹⁹ However, the *Jqtnar* have another role, as the providers of alcohol and hosts of feasts. The best-known example of this last role is the previously discussed story of the theft of the mead.

It is quite noteworthy that most of the drinking scenes described at length, both in Snorri's *Edda* and in the mythological poems of the *Poetic Edda*, take place mainly among the *Jqtnar*. In general, mead and feasts seem to be related to them and to their realm, Jqtunheim, in particular. In this section, I will analyze the Eddic drinking scenes which take place outside Ásgarðr with the intention to find out more information about the role of the *Jqtnar* as alcohol-providers and feast-holders as well as their connection with brewing. I believe that the evidence shows that brewing was not known in Ásgarðr;

⁴⁹⁷ *Vsp* 8.

⁴⁹⁸ See, for example, the eddic poems *Vm* and *Hdl*.

⁴⁹⁹ Lotte Motz, ‘Snorri’s Story of the Cheated Mason and its Folklore Parallels’, *Maal og Minne*, (1977), 115-22 (p. 116).

thus the *Æsir* had to harass the *Jǫtnar* in order to have access to alcohol, as we have already seen in the previous analysis of the myths of the mead as recorded in *Hávamál* and in Snorri's *Edda*.

Apart from the previously mentioned references in *Hávamál*, there are three mythological lays in the *Poetic Edda* in which drinking scenes are directly associated with the *Jǫtnar*.⁵⁰⁰ Let us begin with the analysis of *Hymiskviða*, probably composed in the first half of the twelfth century.⁵⁰¹ It relates the story of Þórr's journey to Hymir's hall with the purpose of obtaining a cauldron big enough for *Ægir* to brew ale for the *Æsir*. The *Jǫtunn* *Ægir*, elsewhere known as *Hlér* or *Gymir*, and his wife *Rán*, one of the *Ásynjur*, were the Old Norse deities of the ocean. The poem opens with a feasting scene in the following words:

*Ár valtívar veiðar námo,
oc sumblsamir, áðr saðir yrði,
hristo teina oc á hlaut sá,
fundo þeir at Ægis ørkost hvera.⁵⁰²*

(Once the gods took the product of their hunting and gathered in a banquet. Before they were satisfied they shook the twigs and saw the lot, and they found that there was no cauldron at *Ægir*'s.)

*Sat bergbúi barnteitr fyr
miqc glicr megi miscorblinda,
leit í augu Yggs barn í þrá:
þú scalt ásum oft sumbl gora!⁵⁰³*

(The mountain-dweller sat happy as a child in front of them, very much like the son of the great mash-bender. Óðinn's son [Þórr] looked into his eyes in defiance: 'You shall often make feasts for the *Æsir*!')

The last stanza of the poem⁵⁰⁴ clearly states that the feast was held at *Ægir*'s place, which also seems to be confirmed by the fact that *Ægir* was expected to provide the *Æsir* with brew and to have a cauldron with him. The conflict apparently begins when

⁵⁰⁰ These are, namely *Hym*, *Ls* and *Þrk*.

⁵⁰¹ Otto Gschwantler, 'Hymiskviða', in *Medieval Scandinavia*, ed. by Pulsiano, pp. 308-9 (*Hymiskviða*).

⁵⁰² *LexPoet* renders *qrkostr hvera* as "rigeligt forråd, overflod" (ample choice, abundant) (*LexPoet*, *qrkostr*). *ONP* and *OGNS* do not list it. For my translation I follow the *IED*: "fundo þeir at Ægis ørkost hvera: they found no cauldron by *Ægir*." This translation confers the exact opposite meaning on the sentence. *IED*, *ørkost*.

⁵⁰³ *Hym* 1-2.

⁵⁰⁴ "En véar hverian vel skolo drekka / qlðr at Ægis eitt hqrmeitið" (and each winter we shall amply drink ale at *Ægir*'s) *Hym* 39. The meaning of the word *hqrmeitið* is unknown. See *LexPoet*, *hqrmeitið*.

the feasters run out of drink before they have had their fill of it. However, Ægir does not give the impression of being concerned about the lack of brewing cauldrons and drink for “*qnn fekk iqtني / orðbæginn halr.*”⁵⁰⁵ (the quarrelsome men annoyed the *Jqtunn*.) He seems to be quite happy about not having the means to provide alcohol and thus bring the party to an end, for when the Æsir find out about the lack of cauldrons, his reaction is said to be “*sat bergbúi / barniteitr.*”⁵⁰⁶ (the mountain dweller sat glad as a child.) Ægir’s happiness may be due to the fact that he had the perfect excuse to send the annoying Æsir back to Ásgarðr. However, the excuse does not seem to satisfy the Æsir as Þórr, offended, looks him in the eye and tells him: “*þú scalt ásom / opt sumbl gora!*”⁵⁰⁷ (You shall often make feasts for the Æsir!) These words give the impression of being more a reminder of Ægir’s duties towards the Æsir than the imposition of a new task on him. What Þórr seems to be doing is just reminding Ægir of his obligations and letting him know that his excuses are not enough to break the *status quo*. His responsibility has so far been to “often make feasts for the Æsir” and Þórr is just ensuring that the tradition continues. Ægir might have been an excellent brewer in order to incite the gods to choose him as a host for their partying and force him to brew for them, even if this implied that Þórr had to undertake a long journey to fetch a brewing cauldron, as happens later in the poem.

As a matter of fact, Ægir seems to have a strong connection with brewing. Of the ten times he is mentioned in the *Poetic Edda*,⁵⁰⁸ nine are directly connected with his role as a host of feasts. Snorri’s *Edda* depicts him in a similar role: “*Ægir sótti heimboð til Ásgarðs, en hann var búinn til heimferðar þá bauð hann til sín Óðni ok qlum Ásum á þriggja mánaða fresti.*”⁵⁰⁹ (Ægir went to a feast in Asgarðr, and when he was about to part and go back home then he invited Oðinn and all the Æsir to his place in three

⁵⁰⁵ *Hym 3.*

⁵⁰⁶ *Hym 2.*

⁵⁰⁷ *Hym 2.*

⁵⁰⁸ *Grm 45; Hym 1 and 39, Ls 3, 4, 10, 14, 16, 18, 27 and 65; HH 29.* See *CEP, Ægir.*

⁵⁰⁹ *Skspm 33, p. 40.*

months' time.) Finally, when in *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, Egil mentions him in his *Sonatorrek* he refers to the god of the sea as “*qlsmiðr*”⁵¹⁰ (ale-smith).

Despite the fact that in Snorri's *Edda* Ægir appears as a guest of the gods before hosting a party himself, in the *Poetic Edda* his role is always that of the host. In *Grimnismál*, just after revealing his identity at Geirrøðr's drinking hall Óðinn says: “*qllom ásom þat skal inn koma / Ægis bekki á, Ægis drekko at.*”⁵¹¹ (All the Æsir shall come to Ægir's benches, to Ægir's feast.) This makes Ægir's hall sound like the regular place for the Æsir to feast, as it occurs in a context in which Óðinn is revealing his identity by demonstrating his knowledge of the world and by telling about the Æsir's customs. The idea of the *Jqtunn*'s hall as the usual place where the Æsir celebrate their feasts seems to be confirmed in the very last lines of *Hymiskviða* when, after fetching the cauldron Þórr re-affirms his initial statement about Ægir's duty to host the Æsir's feasts by stating “*enn véar hverian vel scolo drecca / qlðr at Ægis eitt hqrmeitið.*”⁵¹² (and always we shall amply drink ale at Ægir's [?])⁵¹³ Even if it is not possible to make much sense out of *Hymiskviða* 39 or locate the poem at a certain point in mythical time, Ægir's destiny as a (probably forced) host of feasts for the Æsir comes from the remaining occasions in which he appears in the *Poetic Edda*. These occur in *Lokasenna* (also called *Ægisdrekka* in paper manuscripts),⁵¹⁴ an Eddic poem that depicts one of Loki's confrontations with the Æsir and the Elves. The dating of this lay has been the subject of much controversy, as, due to its satirical nature, it has been considered to be

⁵¹⁰ *Eg* LXXVIII, p. 249.

⁵¹¹ *Grm* 45.

⁵¹² *Hym* 39.

⁵¹³ The translation of this passage is difficult since this stanza is corrupt. *LexPoet*, tells us about ‘*hqrmeitið*’ that “*ordet er forvansket og alle de foreslåede rettelser lige uantagelige (LexPoet, hqrmeitið.)*” (The word is deformed and all the proposed corrections are equally unacceptable). For ‘*véar*’ the *IED* states: “in *Lex. Poet.* Entered among the names of gods, but scarcely rightly so, for the *Hým.* 39 is corrupt; ‘*véar skulu*’ probably is ‘*Véorr skyli*’... *drekka eitt öldr*, may W[éar]. (i.e. Thor) enjoy a banquet with Ægir!” (*IED, véar*).

⁵¹⁴ Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, ‘Loki's *Senna* in Ægir's Hall’, in *Idee, Gestalt, Geschichte: Festschrift Klasus von See, Studien zur Europäischen Kulturtradition*, ed. by Gerd Wolfgang Weber (Odense: Odense University Press, 1988), pp. 239-259 (p. 243) and; Philip N. Anderson, ‘*Lokasenna*’ in *Medieval Scandinavia*, ed. by Phillip Pulsiano, p. 394.

either an early and purely pagan poem or, for the same reason, a late and Christian poem mocking the pagan gods.⁵¹⁵

The action in *Lokasenna* takes place during one of the feasts in Ægir's hall. The prose preceding the verses in the *Codex Regius* of the *Poetic Edda* explains that this episode happens as part of the same celebration described in *Hymiskviða*.⁵¹⁶ However this does not seem plausible for the prose says that “Þórr kom eigi, þvíat hann var í austrveg”⁵¹⁷ (Þórr did not come, because he was in the east), and if this was the continuation of the same feast described in *Hymiskviða* Þórr could not have been absent, travelling in the east, since he had just brought the cauldron and stated that he (Þórr) should always enjoy Ægir's ale. A sudden trip to the east would not make any sense. Carolyne Larrington, while trying to explain Loki's entrance to Ægir's hall, says that “the prose introduction seems to misunderstand the poem.”⁵¹⁸ This idea could also apply to the misunderstanding of the date at which the party took place. The most probable explanation for these contradictions is that the editor of *Lokasenna* was trying to unify two different stories about two different occasions in which the Æsir were drinking at Ægir's or that he was trying to bring together two different traditions about the events at the same feast. As the evidence in the sources points to either two different stories or two different myths I will consider the feasts in *Lokasenna* and *Hymiskviða* as being different occurrences of drinking at Ægir's hall.

The feast described in *Lokasenna* shows some similarities with the one mentioned in *Skáldskaparmál* 33. In both accounts Þórr is absent, as Snorri tells that ‘Þórr var eigi þar. Hann var farinn í Austrveg at drepa tröll’⁵¹⁹ (Þórr was not there. He

⁵¹⁵ For a further analysis of the dating of the poem and its pre-Christian and Christian elements see Sørensen, ‘Loki's Senna’, pp. 239-59.

⁵¹⁶ *Ægir, er qðro naf<n>i hét Gymir, hann hafði búit ásom ql, þá er hann hafði fengit ketil inn mikla, sem nú er sagt.* (Ægir, who is also called Gymir, he had brewed ale for the Æsir when he had got the great cauldron, as it was just told.) *Ls* ‘Prologue’.

⁵¹⁷ *Ls* ‘Prologue’.

⁵¹⁸ ‘Loki's Quarrel’, trans. by Carolyne Larrington, in *The Poetic Edda* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 84-96 (p. 84).

⁵¹⁹ *Skspm* 33, p. 40.

had gone to the east to kill trolls.) and *Lokasenna* reports that “Þórr kom eigi, þvíat hann var í austrvegi.” (Þórr did not come, because he was in the east.) Both sources comment about the quality of the service at the hall, but they do so in a different way. In *Lokasenna* it is said that “menn lofoðu miqc, hversu góðir þiónustomenn Ægis vóro.”⁵²⁰ (People praised much how good Ægir’s servants were.) These servants are also mentioned by Snorri, and in both accounts it is said that one of them is murdered by Loki. However, in *Lokasenna* it is said that Loki killed him because he was envious, while in Snorri’s text the murder happens after Loki’s quarrel with the Æsir (and not before, as in *Lokasenna*) and there is no reason given for it. However, in spite of the presence of servants, in Snorri the service is of a rather supernatural character, as “at þeiri veizlu vannsk alt sjálf, bæði vist ok ql ok qll reiða er til veizlunnar þurfti.”⁵²¹ (at that feast everything served itself, both the food and ale and all the utensils that were needed for the feast.) From this we can infer that Snorri was mixing two different variants of the myth: one in which the servants are so good that Loki murders one of them and another in which servants appear to be unnecessary, as everything served itself. In short, what we can deduce from these divergences is that there seems to be a well established idea about the gods drinking at Ægir’s hall, or that we are being misled by the many different variants that might have been preserved about the same feast.

If this last case is true and we are looking at several different variants of the same myth, we can then gather that it was a very important feast (and myth) as to lead to several different traditions around it. But why would this particular feast be so important as to be recorded in many variants? As Preben Meulengracht Sørensen suggests, this feasting scene might have been perceived as the very last one before

⁵²⁰ *Ls* ‘Prologue’.

⁵²¹ *Skspm* 33, p. 41.

Ragnarqk, as it is set in a frame of time between the death of Baldr and the capture of Loki.⁵²² Also, Loki's final words in *Lokasenna* point towards this idea:

*Ql gorðir þú, Ægir, en þú aldri munt
síðan sumbl um gora;
eiga þin qll, er hér inni er,
leiki yfir logi,
oc brenni þér á baki.*⁵²³

(You brewed *ql*, Ægir, but you will never again host a feast.
All your possessions that are in here, may fire play with them,
and may your back be burnt.)

Loki's words not only imply that the drinking tradition at Ægir's hall has come to an end for reasons we will see below but also, that in mentioning the end of all the feasters by fire, Loki evokes an image of Ragnarqk, when Surtr will burn the world.⁵²⁴

But, why does Loki emphasise that Ægir will not be able to hold more feasts? This might also be related to Loki's motivations to rush into the feast and incite the Æsir to violence by insulting them.⁵²⁵ Ægir's drinking hall is described as "*griðastaðr mikill*"⁵²⁶ (a great sanctuary) which means that it was a place of inviolable peace. The poem has plenty of references to the fact that the hall is a sanctuary, perhaps as an explanation for why the gods do not attack Loki. We may find the reason for this behaviour in Bragi's speech:

*Veit ec, ef fyr útan værac, svá sem fyr innan emc
Ægis hqll um kominn,
hqfuð þitt bæra ec í hendi mér.*⁵²⁷

(I know that if I was outside, just as now I am inside Ægir's
hall at the moment, I would carry your head in my hand.)

Other gods react in a similar way in what seems to be an effort not to defile the place.

Iðunn asks Bragi "*at þú Loca / qveðira lastastqfom Ægis hqllu í*"⁵²⁸ (that you shall not say insulting words to Loki in Ægir's hall.) and when she confronts Loki she stresses

⁵²² Sørensen, 'Loki's *Senna*', pp. 239-59.

⁵²³ *Ls* 65.

⁵²⁴ This idea of holding a feast before battle is in agreement with examples from other literary sources. See Chapter 4.3.

⁵²⁵ See John McKinnell, 'Motivation in *Lokasenna*', *Saga-Book*, 22: 3-4 (1987-88), 234-62 and; Sørensen, 'Loki's *Senna*', pp. 239-59.

⁵²⁶ *Ls* 'Prologue'. "A great sanctuary". Literally "Place of holy peace". This might well reflect the idea(l) of the drinking halls at the time the prose passage was written.

⁵²⁷ *Ls* 14.

⁵²⁸ *Ls* 16.

that “*Loca ec qveðca lastastqfm / Ægis hqlló í*”⁵²⁹. (I don’t say insulting words to Loki in Ægir’s hall). The formula *lastastqfm Ægis hqlló í* (insulting words in Ægir’s hall) is repeated on several occasions and stresses the fear of the insulting words. As Philip Anderson points out “repetition of lines and phrases serves to emphasise particular points and give an indication of what the poet finds important about the speaker.”⁵³⁰ His argument is about the use of the word ‘*lastastqfm*’, but I believe that, over all, the poet is highlighting not the words themselves but the fact that they may be articulated inside Ægir’s hall, and thus defile the *griðastaðr* by breaking the peace even in a verbal sense.⁵³¹ In the end, the *griðastaðr* is defiled and it ends up losing its holiness. Loki’s last stanza would appear as a boast of his triumph, by stating that Ægir will not be able to hold more feasts and that they all will be consumed by fire. I would like to draw attention to the first half of the stanza. “*Ql gorðir þú, Ægir, en þú aldri munt / síðan sumbl um gora*” (You brewed ale, Ægir, but you will never again host a feast.) implies that Ægir brewed ale and held parties more than once. But, why won’t Ægir continue his habit of holding feasts? The proximity of Ragnarqk, as Anderson points,⁵³² may be an explanation for this. However, we know also that the *griðastaðr* had been defiled, not only by the exchange of words between the gods, but also because Loki had killed Fimafengr, one of Ægir’s servants, inside the hall. Therefore the sanctuary has lost its holiness, and whatever (cultic) feasts took place there could not be celebrated anymore, at least not in Ægir’s defiled hall.

⁵²⁹ *Ls* 18.

⁵³⁰ Philip N. Anderson, ‘Form and Content in *Lokasenna*: A Re-evaluation’, in *The Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Mythology*, ed. by Paul Acker and others (New York & London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 139-157 (p. 148).

⁵³¹ *Gylf* 34 gives us a clue of the ways in which a *griðastaðr* could be defiled: *svá mikils virðu goðin vé sín ok griðastaði at eigi vildu þau saurga þá með blóði úlfsins þótt svá segi spárnar at hann muni verða at bana Óðni.* (*Gylf* 34, p. 29.) (so greatly the gods valued their sanctuary and place of inviolability that they did not want to spoil it with the blood of the wolf, even though the prophesy says that he will be the death of Óðinn.)

⁵³² Anderson, 148.

In Viking and Medieval Iceland and Norway, drinking halls had an important religious and cultic role as places in which society was shaped.⁵³³ Also, the events at this particular feast among the gods will help us to interpret some reenactments of the *senna* and drinking matches in other literary sources.⁵³⁴ Meanwhile let us focus on the fact that Ægir's hall was considered as a *griðastaðr* by the gods and this would imply that they consider it as a place apt for feasting. The only other *griðastaðr* mentioned in the *Eddas* is Ásgarðr.

Going back to the *Jqtnar* as alcohol providers, the instances we have presented so far can prove only that the Æsir had a certain predilection for feasting in Ægir's hall. But this does not necessarily point to a connection between the *Jqtnar* and mead, ale or feasting. There are, however, some other instances among the Eddic poems that indicate that mead or ale are an exclusive possession or attribute of the *Jqtnar*. In *Hyndluljóð*, for example, once Freyja has obtained all the information that she needed from Hyndla, a *Jqtunn*-woman, she asks her for 'memory-ale':

*Ber þú minnisql minom getti,
svát hann qll muni orð at tina,
þessar ræðo.*⁵³⁵

(Give memory *ql* to my boar / so that he all remembers, words
to recount / from this conversation)

We are not told what kind of memory ale⁵³⁶ this is, nor why it is in the possession of the *Jqtunn*-woman. Whatever its origins and history are, the ale does not belong to the Æsir, and they cannot produce something similar; if they could, Freyja would not need make a journey in order to wake a dead *Jqtunn*-woman and ask for it. Whatever its origins and history are, it must be a precious beverage as the mere request for some triggers Hyndla's anger. When Freyja questions her about different topics Hyndla answers, if not willingly, at least politely, but as soon as the *Jqtunn* contemplates the

⁵³³ Drinking halls will be analyzed in Chapter 4.

⁵³⁴ Drinking matches will be discussed in Chapter 6.

⁵³⁵ *Hnd* 45.

⁵³⁶ As we will see in Chapter 7, in literature ale is related to memory loss, especially in the cases in which it is a magical concoction.

possibility of losing some of the *minnisql* she answers “*snúðu burt heðan!*”⁵³⁷ (get away from here!) Her other responses are to threaten Freyja with not letting her leave the place⁵³⁸ and poisoning the ale.

In *Skírnismál*, Gerðr, a *Jqtunn*-woman, offers some mead to Skírnir as a sign of welcome. But the mead that she has to offer does not seem to be a very special one, even if she calls it *mærr mjqðr*⁵³⁹ (famous mead) and, later, when she has betrothed herself to Freyr she calls it *forn mjqðr*⁵⁴⁰ (ancient mead) when toasting. As mentioned before, these adjectives seem to be the result of poetic convention rather than implying that the mead is a special one. It also does not seem to be a special kind of mead due to the willingness and ease with which she offers it.

It is quite noteworthy that Gerðr’s father is called Gymir, which happens to be one of Ægir’s names. A further parallel between Gymir-Ægir and Gymir is that both of them own a *mærr mjqðr* (famous mead). The texts, however, do not make explicit if they are the same *Jqtunn*, though everything else suggests that they are not.⁵⁴¹ As for their place of abode we know that Gymir lives in *Jqtunheim* as the prose preceding stanza 11 in *Skírnismál* tells us. On the other hand we don’t know where Gymir-Ægir lives. However, due to his role as lord of the ocean his hall is most probably in the sea and not in *Jqtunheim*.

What we know so far is that Gymir is the owner of ancient mead, while Ægir produces a certain kind of ale that is a favourite among the gods and which the *Æsir* seem to prefer to the mead produced by Heiðrún. The most probable explanation is that

⁵³⁷ *Hyndluljóð* 46.

⁵³⁸ This place might be *Jqtunheim*, or, more probably *Hel*, one realm of the dead, which is sometimes visited to get information. This last supposition might be reinforced by the fact that Freyja’s initial words to *Hyndla* are “*Vaki, mærr meyrja!*” (*Hdl* 1), “Wake up, maid of maids!”

⁵³⁹ *Skm* 16.

⁵⁴⁰ *Skm* 37.

⁵⁴¹ Gerðr “*var Gymis dóttir, iqtina ættar ok Aurboðu*” (was Gymir’s daughter, of the *Jqtun* and *Aurboða*) while Gymir-Ægir was married to *Rán* and their daughters were the waves. Thus, the only possibility to equate Gymir, Gerðr’s father, with Gymir-Ægir is that Gymir-Ægir conceived her with *Aurboða* out of wedlock.

we have one tradition that splits into two: the tradition of Gyimir as owner of mead and the tradition of Gyimir-Ægir as a master brewer and host of feasts.

Finally, the last drinking scene in Jqtnheim is that in *Þrymskviða*, when Þórr travels there in disguise in order to recover his hammer. This scene describes what a wedding feast would be like among the *Jqtnar*.⁵⁴² In this case, however, it is only said that mead is served in large amounts.⁵⁴³

From what we can gather from the sources, it appears that the *Æsir* do not know how to brew. This may explain why they terrorize the *Jqtnar* in their quest for alcoholic beverages. Not a single *Æsir* is associated to the production of alcohol, even though it is a very important product for them! Their only sources for these beverages are Heiðrún and the *Jqtnar*. These last may be related with feasting and eating due to the fact that the Old Norse noun *Jqtunn* is “perhaps related with the verb *eta* (to eat), a supposition strengthened by the cognate Old English term *eoten* and Middle English *ettin*.”⁵⁴⁴

The idea about the lack of brewing in Ásgarðr seems to be reinforced by the Eddic poem *Hymiskviða*. When in the poem Þórr is sent to fetch a cauldron for Ægir to brew in, the *Æsir* do not have any idea of where to find one. Instead of going to the dwarves so they can forge one, Týr decides to resort to Hymir, another *Jqtunn*, in order to get one because he has “*móðugr, ketil, / rúmbregðinn hver, rastar diúpan*.”⁵⁴⁵ (a gigantic kettle, of great capacity, / a mile deep) This shows that the *Æsir* did not have a brewing cauldron of their own (or at least not one big enough as to brew mead for them all) for if they did Þórr would not have been obliged to make such a long journey when he could just have gone home to fetch their own. Thus, they did not brew or at least not for feasts. Accordingly, whenever the *Æsir* need to get mead, ale or brews in general, as well as the means to brew them, the first option is to resort to the *Jqtnar*.

⁵⁴² Wedding feasts will be studied in chapter 5.1.

⁵⁴³ *Þrk* 22-25.

⁵⁴⁴ *DNML*, *jötunn*.

⁵⁴⁵ *Hym* 5. ‘*Rqst*’ as ‘mile’ is used metaphorically, only to express a great depth, but not necessarily a mile.

3.4. – CONCLUSION

As we can see, there seem to be several different myths about the way in which gods and men gained access to alcohol as well as about the way in which alcohol was perceived. The myths about Óðinn gaining the mead sometimes refer to the brew as an intoxicating one and on other occasions as being the source of wisdom and poetic diction. However the earlier stages of the myth of the mead seem to refer to the way in which alcohol was acquired by the gods and men and not to a particular mead which conferred a particular kind of knowledge. The misunderstanding of the sources may be due to the fact that most scholars tend to base their analysis of the different sources of the myth on Snorri's rendering or to the poetical convention surrounding the use of the word *mjqðr*, which tends to attach an adjective to the noun.

The origins of mead (and perhaps of brewing) are also manifold. The creation of Kvasir and the mead of poetry appear only in Snorri's texts and there is plenty of evidence to suggest that the myth of Kvasir was the result of Snorri's misinterpretation of a kenning. There are many links between mead and poetry in skaldic poetry; however, in the mythological poems of the *Poetic Edda* there seems to be no connection between alcohol and wisdom. On the contrary, in Eddic poetry, mead is portrayed as a drink that takes men's wits away. The other possible origin of brewing is either the dwarves or the *Jqtnar*, for the sources seem to imply that the *Æsir* did not know how to brew. Therefore we have several different stories telling about the pains some of the *Æsir* had to endure to get access to brews. Even the main source of mead in Valhǫll – Heiðrún - seems to have connections with the *Jqtnar*.

Finally, the fact that the *Æsir* are portrayed as engaged in a constant quest for alcohol, and the fact that endless mead and endless food are considered the main attractions of the most reputed of the afterlife dwellings, reflects the actual difficulties

that men had in obtaining these products. As we have already seen in chapter 2, prices and availability meant that alcoholic beverages were not easy to obtain. This scarcity seems to have been extrapolated to the world of the gods who, just as the Norsemen, also had to struggle in order to get hold of alcoholic drinks.

CHAPTER 4: DRINKING PLACES: *SKÁLAR*, *HALLAR*, *SKYTNINGAR* AND *HJÚKÓLFAR* AND OTHER DRINKING LOCATIONS

4.1- *HALLAR* AND *SKÁLAR*

Most of the wedding, funeral, seasonal and other feasts that will be discussed in Chapter 5 were certainly celebrated in drinking halls instead of in *skytningar*⁵⁴⁶ or out in the open. After all, the halls were buildings (or part of buildings) whose most important role was to provide a place for the king or chieftain to gather his followers in order to celebrate. However, the halls were not used exclusively for feasting purposes. As Preben Meulengracht Sørensen puts it, “these were the places which formed the framework of domestic life in the Viking Age, of work and rest, entertainment, banquets and festivity – practically all manifestations of peaceful human intercourse.”⁵⁴⁷ In a certain way we could say with Stephen Pollington that the hall was “a theatre, a church, a court, a town-hall, a community centre and a pub.”⁵⁴⁸ However, during the largest part of the year the hall was used, as any other room or building in the farm, to perform daily activities. For example, at the chieftain’s house in Borg, in Lofoten, “room C is interpreted as having two main functions; during most of the year it was an ordinary living room, but on special occasions it functioned as a ‘banqueting hall’ in which the chieftain’s great feasts took place.”⁵⁴⁹ These feasts could have been of a secular or of a religious nature – as seems to be attested by the large amount of *guldgubber*⁵⁵⁰ found at the site. Halls were multipurpose rooms (either attached to or separated from the main building) but for the purpose of this analysis I will study only those occasions on which they were

⁵⁴⁶ *Skytningar* and *hjúkólfar* will be discussed in section 4.2.

⁵⁴⁷ Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, ‘The Hall in Norse Literature’, in *Borg in Lofoten*, ed. by Gerd Stamsø Munch and others (Trondheim: Tapir Academic Press, 2003), pp. 265-72 (p. 265).

⁵⁴⁸ Pollington, p. 10.

⁵⁴⁹ Gerd Stamsø Munch, ‘Borg as a Pagan Centre’, in *Borg in Lofoten: A Chieftain’s Farm in North Norway*, ed. by Gerd Stamsø Munch and others (Trondheim: Tapir Academic Press, 2003), pp. 253-63 (p. 253).

⁵⁵⁰ *Guldgubber* are small gold-foil male and female stamped figures found in sites across Scandinavia and believed to have a religious connotation. There is no English translation for this term.

used to hold feasts, leaving aside the religious and/or domestic activities that took part in them most of the time.

In order to begin this study it is necessary to consider one of the main symbolic roles of halls, namely, the role they played in the display and preservation of power. The hall was the place where the chieftain exercised his authority. It was here, and mostly during feasts, that the chieftain created and reaffirmed his power,⁵⁵¹ where he gathered his followers, where he created and strengthened his alliances by “the giving of gifts, the bestowal of honours, the granting of land. It [the hall] is both the starting point and culmination of the most significant communal rituals, judgements, deliberations and celebrations and thus is a special, even holy, place which the unworthy are not to approach.”⁵⁵² Hence, I have reserved all these power-related aspects of drinking halls for the final chapters of this study, where the relationship between drinking and power will be studied.

The two most common Old Norse words for halls are *skáli* and *hqll*. Jan de Vries defines the term *hqll* simply as “*halle*”⁵⁵³ (hall) while Alexander Jóhannesson states that it is a “*grosses haus*”⁵⁵⁴ (great house). “According to Stefan Brink the word ‘hall’, *hqll* is possibly a loan from West Germanic language, maybe first adopted in the skaldic language.”⁵⁵⁵ However, in the written sources the word *hqll* is used “only of a king’s or earl’s hall, whereas a private dwelling is called a *skáli*, *eldhús*.”⁵⁵⁶ *Hqll* is also used to name the different drinking halls of the *Æsir* and of the *Jqtnar*. *Skáli* can be translated as “*scheune; trinkhalle*”⁵⁵⁷ (barn; drinking hall) or as a “*hütte, schlafzimmer, saal, vordiele*”⁵⁵⁸ (hut, bed chamber, hall, porch). This distinction in the naming of the halls of nobles and those of farmers imposes also a geographical division as both

⁵⁵¹ The relationship between power and alcohol will be studied in Chapter 6.

⁵⁵² Enright, p. 5.

⁵⁵³ *AEW*, *hqll*.

⁵⁵⁴ *IEW*, 242.

⁵⁵⁵ Sørensen, ‘The Hall’, p. 268.

⁵⁵⁶ *IED*, *höll*.

⁵⁵⁷ *AEW*, *skáli*.

⁵⁵⁸ *IEW*, 815.

wooden and stone *hallar* were to be found only in Norway, Denmark, Sweden, the British Isles, Permian, Bjarmaland, Garðaríki and, in general, in countries with a monarchy; but none of the halls of the Norwegian landholders or of the Icelandic *goðar* and land-owning farmers were to be named *holl*.⁵⁵⁹ In other words, the literary sources make a geographical division in the naming of the building, even if there were no major architectural differences between them. Only *skálar* were to be found in Iceland, but not only there, as the halls of non-noble landholders in other countries were called by the same name. Perhaps the difference in the naming of these rooms/buildings comes from the fact that the *hallar*, belonging to the royalty, were mainly used as drinking halls, while the farmers and petty-king's/chieftains' *skálar* were multipurpose rooms, which rarely held feasts and were used more often as a sleeping room or as a place to shelter cattle or other mundane activities.

The earliest Viking Age *hallar* were rooms, such as Room C in Borg. That is, they formed part of the chieftain's house; (see figures 4.1 and 4.2) but later, when the monarchy became better established and the king's authority and power increased, they became the room in which the king held his court as well as his banquets in a more regular basis. Such is the case of King Hákon Hákonsson's hall, (see figure 4.3) in Bergen. This early thirteenth-century stone construction seems to differentiate the areas devoted to the King's political activities and feasts from those devoted to ordinary eating and/or sleeping. The construction of Hákon's hall began around 1217 but "*i 1247 var det bare én steinbygning I kongsgarden*"⁵⁶⁰ (in 1247 there was only one stone building in the king's garth). Then, in 1261, "*ble begge hallene for første gang bygg som i dag*"⁵⁶¹ (the hall was first built as it stands today). This new construction differentiated social spaces. Accordingly, in the basement there is a large area devoted

⁵⁵⁹ Other words used to name halls are *stofa*, *eldhús*, *salr*, *rann*.

⁵⁶⁰ Rognvald Rocher Nielsen, *Bergenhus og dets Festningsverker*, Foreningen Håkonshallens Venner (Bergen: John Griegs Boktrykkeri, no date), pp 14-15.

⁵⁶¹ Rocher Nielsen, p. 15.

mainly to eating in a rather mundane way (and most probably reserved for the nourishing of low status guests at his fortress) while the King's hall, court and high seat were located on the first floor. This was not the case in Iceland, where there was no central authority and the *skálar* remained throughout the Middle Ages as a multipurpose room or building of the settlement where different members of the society ate and feasted all-together and where the chieftain also performed his political activities.

Since *skálar* were used for various activities, it was necessary for them to have movable benches and furniture in general. When the time for a feast arrived the *skáli* was decorated in order to display the chieftain's or owner's high-status and symbolic possessions, such as weapons, drinking vessels and tapestries. Also, in case of need, any large building could play the role of a *skáli*. For example, in *Egils saga* we are told that Þórólfr Kveld-Úlfsson prepares a feast for King Haraldr hárfagri at his farm in Northern Norway and must improvise a hall because his *skáli* is not large enough to accommodate both the King's and his own retinues.

Þórólfr bjó veizlu í móti konungi ok lagði á kostnað mikinn; var þat ákveðit, nær konungr skyldi þar koma. Þórólfr bauð þangat fjölfra manns ok hafði þar allt it bezta mannval, þat er kostr var. Konungr hafði nær þrjú hundruð manna, er hann kom til veizlunnar, en Þórólfr hafði fyrir fimm hundruð manna. Þórólfr hafði látit búa kornhlöðu mikla, er þar var, ok látit leggja bekki í ok lét þar drekka, því at þar var engi stofa svá mikil, er þat fjölmenni mætti allt inni vera; þar váru ok festir skildir umhverfis í húsinu.⁵⁶²

(Þórólfr prepared a feast to welcome the king and he ran into great expenses; it was fixed to take place when the king arrived. Þórólfr invited a large number of guests, including all the best choice of people, those who were the leading men. The king had a retinue of nearly three hundred men when he arrived to the feast and Þórólfr had a retinue of five hundred men.⁵⁶³ Þórólfr had prepared a great barn that was there and had benches set in it. He arranged for the drinking to take place in there because there was no room large enough to accommodate all the men. Shields were fastened all around the building.)

Similarly, in *Njáls saga* we read that “*Síðan bauð Hqskuldr þeim heim í Ossabæ; hann hafði þar marga fyrirboðsmenn ok mikit fjölmenni. Hann hafði látit taka ofan skála*

⁵⁶² *Eg XI*, p. 28-29.

⁵⁶³ That is, the king had a retinue of around 360 men, while Þórólfr's retinue was of six hundred men.

*sinn, en hann átti útibúr þrjú, ok váru þau búin at hvíla í. Þeir koma allir til veizlu, sem hann hafði boðit; veizlan fór allvel fram.*⁵⁶⁴ (Then Hqskuldr invited them to his home in Ossabær; he had a large number of feast-guests and a large company. He had torn down his hall, but he had three store-houses, and they were arranged for sleeping in.⁵⁶⁵ Everyone whom he had invited attended the feast; the feast went very well.)

Even though these episodes represent quite unusual events, they illustrate how even a barn or a store-room could actually be decorated and dignified to receive a king or a large number of guests. Perhaps this honour did not come from the building itself, but from the actual magnificence of the host as well as from the decoration of the building. So, this passage emphasizes Þórólfr's expenses in providing an outstanding feast as well as his efforts to decorate the barn. After all,

one common feature of buildings interpreted as halls is that they generally have a large central open space, ideal for use as an assembly room.⁵⁶⁶

In general any building with a large central open space could function as a hall, its prestige coming mainly from the power of the chieftain who owned the building, from the central location of the hall itself, and most probably from the ornamentation of the hall. Even though any large building could serve as a hall, for the purposes of this study we will understand a hall in the terms in which Jenny Walker defines it, which is "as a monumental, ideologically expressive building with associated high-status artefacts."⁵⁶⁷

Our sources do not pay much attention to the description and outline of the halls in which the action takes place. But the saga writers show an especial interest in the portrayal of the different power relationships that are played out within the hall, such as

⁵⁶⁴ *Nj* CIX, p. 276-77.

⁵⁶⁵ Halls were commonly used as sleeping quarters for the guests once the feast came to an end for the night. This was due to the lack of space needed to accommodate a large number of visitors.

⁵⁶⁶ Pollington, p. 71.

⁵⁶⁷ Jenny Walker, 'Articulate Architecture?: Timber Halls and Ideological Expression', *Bulletin of International Medieval Research*, 11 (2005), 23-45 (p. 25).

the seating order⁵⁶⁸ and, on some occasions, the decoration of the hall. In this section we will focus our attention mainly on the ornamentation of the halls.

In the literary sources it is possible to read about chieftains and powerful farmers preparing their halls to receive the guests. For example, in *Gísla saga* we read about two simultaneous feasts in neighbouring farms. In one, “*Drykkja skyldi vera at hvárratveggja, ok var strát gólf á Sæbóli af sefinu af Seftjqrn.*”⁵⁶⁹ (There was to be a drinking feast at both places and the floor at (the house at) Sæból was strewn with sedge from Seftjqrn.) Meanwhile, at the other farm “*Þá er þeir Þorgrímr bjuggusk um ok skyldu tjalda húsin, en boðsmanna var þangat ván um kveldit, þá mælti Þorgrímr við Þorkel: “Vel kæmi oss nú reflarnir þeir inir góðu, er Vésteinn vildi gefa þér.”*”⁵⁷⁰ (At Þorgrímr’s they started the preparations and were about to place the hangings in the house because the guests were expected in the evening. Then Þorgrímr spoke with Þorkel: “Well would serve us now those good tapestries which Véstein wanted to give to you.) And when Þorgrímr the chieftain finally gets the tapestry(s) he expresses his joy “*Þessa þurfu vér nú,*” segir Þorgrímr, ok láta upp refilinn”.⁵⁷¹ (This is what we need,” says Þorgrímr, and he put up the tapestry.)

The decoration of the hall might have been a way for the chieftain to acquire prestige. In *Laxdóla saga* the glory of a magnificently decorated hall is preserved in an account of a wedding feast at Hjarðarholt, this description might help us imagine the way in which halls were prepared for a feast. The saga reports that: “*Þat sumar lét Ólafr gera eldhús í Hjarðarholti, meira ok betra en menn hefði fyrr sét. Váru þar markaðar ágætligar sqgur á þilviðinum ok svá á ræfrinu; var þat svá vel smíðat, at þá þótti miklu skrautligra, er eigi váru tjaldin uppi*”⁵⁷² (That summer Ólafr had a fire-house built in Hjarðarholt; it was larger and better than men had seen before. There were carved

⁵⁶⁸ Seating arrangements within the hall are studied in the last section of this chapter.

⁵⁶⁹ *Gísl XV*, p. 51.

⁵⁷⁰ *Gísl XV*, p. 51.

⁵⁷¹ *Gísl XV*, p. 51.

⁵⁷² *Laxdóla XXIX*, p. 79.

glorious stories on the wood of the gables and on the rafters; it was so well crafted that it was thought more splendid in its ornamentation when the tapestries were not hanging.) In this narrative can see that the ornamentation of at least some halls was not dependent only on the hangings, but also on wood carvings. Such a hall could not go unnoticed, and one of the guests at the first feast to be celebrated at this hall composed a poem to honour both the owner and the hall. The poet, Úlfr Uggason “*hafði ort kvæði um Ólaf Hqskuldsson ok um sqgur þær, er skrifaðar vǫru á eldhúsinu, ok fórði hann þar at boðinu. Þetta kvæði er kallað Húsdrápa ok er vel ort.*”⁵⁷³ (had composed a poem about Ólaf Hqskuldsson and about the stories that were carved on the fire-house, and he recited it there at the wedding. This poem is called House *drápa* and is well composed.) It seems then, that this magnificently decorated hall achieved its ultimate purpose; it brought glory to the owner and immortalized him in one of the most sought-after forms of immortality in the Old Norse world, through a poem. Several fragments of *Húsdrápa*, composed in the late tenth century, are preserved in Snorri’s *Edda* and, according to the extant fragments about the carvings, these seem to have represented several mythological scenes.

In the *Fornaldar sqgur* the decoration of the halls is also described in terms of their wall hangings, but instead of using straw to cover the floor people are said to have used a more expensive material: cloth. For example, in *Vqlsunga saga*, we can read that Brynhildr’s hall “*var tjaldat af inum dýrstum tjöldum ok þakit klæðum allt gólfit*”⁵⁷⁴ (was hung with the most precious tapestries and cloth covered the whole floor) while Guðrún’s hall is described as “*Þær gengu inn í þá ina fögru höll. Salrinn var skrifaðr innan ok mjök silfri búinn. Klæði vǫru breidd undir fætr þeim.*”⁵⁷⁵ (They went into the splendid hall. The room was painted and engraved and adorned with much silver. Clothes were spread under their feet.) In general, it seems that the hall decoration was

⁵⁷³ *Laxd* XXIX, p. 80.

⁵⁷⁴ *Vqls* XXIV, p. 168.

⁵⁷⁵ *Vqls* XXV, p. 170.

based, then, on wood carvings (most probably painted); tapestries and some sort of covering for the floor, whether it is straw or cloth.

A final element in the decoration of a hall might be the display of prestigious objects, such as weapons or ornamented drinking vessels. In the Room C, considered as the hall of the building complex at Borg in the Lofoten Islands, a large number of highly decorated glass sherds has been found. These seem to be more numerous in a particular area of the room. This “concentration of luxury objects in the northern corner is so striking that a likely explanation seems to be that most of them stood here on shelves or in a type of cabinet.”⁵⁷⁶ If this is the case, then we should consider the possibility that on that area of the room a large number of prestigious objects was concentrated, maybe with the purpose of displaying them, as we read in the quotation from *Vqlsunga saga* making reference to the room being decorated with silver, most probably silver goblets, and why not, other kinds of glass drinking vessels.

The symbolic role of halls might have not only been linked to the power of its owner. They might have also been an earthly representation of the otherworld halls. It is known that the Old Norse otherworld was full of drinking halls. Basically each of the *Æsir* owned a hall in which to welcome the deceased,⁵⁷⁷ there is a drinking hall at Hell’s court⁵⁷⁸, and several of drinking halls in *Jqtunheim*. Both *Eddas* preserve only a few descriptions of the halls of the gods as well as of the activities that take place in there. Perhaps the best known and documented of these is Valhql, Óðinn’s hall. The eddic poem *Grímnismál* says that: “*Fimm hunduð dura / ok um fiórom tøgom, / svá hygg ek at Valhqllo vera.*”⁵⁷⁹ (Five hundred doors and forty, so I think there are in Valhql.) Apart from its great size, the poem relates that there are two animals living on the hall’s roof;

⁵⁷⁶ Munch, p. 254.

⁵⁷⁷ *Grm* 5-26.

⁵⁷⁸ *Bdr.*

⁵⁷⁹ *Grm* 23.

Heiðrún, a goat that provides the hall with mead,⁵⁸⁰ the other animal is a hart called Eikþyrnir, from whose horns originate all the waters.⁵⁸¹ Both of these animals are said to graze a tree called Léraðr. Presumably this tree stands on the roof of the hall, and it is not quite certain if it is an equivalent of the world-tree Yggdrasill. In any case, that representation of animals grazing on the roof of the hall might be a mythological interpretation of the animals that probably grazed on the turf roofs of earthly halls. As for the decoration of Valhǫll, we are told that “*skǫptom er rann rept, / skjǫldom er salr þakiðr, / bryniom um bekki strát*”⁵⁸² (the hall has spear-shafts as rafters, shields are the hall’s roof, mail-coats are strewn on the benches) and “*vargr hangir / fyr vestan dyrr / ok drúpir qrn yfir.*”⁵⁸³ (a wolf hangs across the western door and an eagle droops above.)

Based on a stanza by Þjóðólfr inn hvinverski and on the same stanzas of *Grímnismál*, Snorri makes a more lengthy description of Valhǫll. According to him, when King Gylfi enters Gláðsheimr, where Valhǫll is located within Ásgarðr, “*þá sá han þar háva hǫll, svá at varla mátti han sjá yfir hana. Þak hennar var lagt gyltum skjǫldum svá sem spánþak. Svá segir Þjóðólfr inn hvinverski at Valhǫll var skjǫldum þakð.*”⁵⁸⁴ (then he saw a high hall, so that he could barely see over it. Its roof was made of gilded shields instead of tiles. So Þjóðólfr inn hvinverski says that Valhǫll was roofed with shields.)

When it comes to real life it would be difficult to find a hall of such dimension and decorated in a similar fashion. There are however two literary instances in which halls are described bearing some resemblance to Valhǫll. In *Hrólfs saga kraka* it is said that King Aðils had a tree standing in his hall. After burning the hall in which he was in order to kill his enemies “*forðaði hann sér ok hljóp at trénu, sem stóð í höllinni, ok*

⁵⁸⁰ Heiðrún and her role as a mead provider has been studied in Chapter 3.

⁵⁸¹ *Grm* 26-26.

⁵⁸² *Grm* 9.

⁵⁸³ *Grm* 10.

⁵⁸⁴ *Gylf* 2.

*var þat holt innan, ok svá komst hann úr höllinni með fjölkynngi sinni ok göldrum.*⁵⁸⁵
(He saved himself by running to the tree which stood in the hall, it was hollow and so he came out of the hall by using his magic and sorcery.) It is doubtful, however, that this tree could have been standing in the hall as a symbol of the tree at Valhöll. The fact that it is said to be a hollow tree means that, unlike Yggdrassill, it was already dead and most probably it is meant to be an example of King Aðils' tricks rather than an actual representation of the tree in Óðinn's hall.

The only other mention of a hall with a tree standing on its centre comes from *Vqlsunga saga*. In it is said that "*Völsungr konungr lét gera höll eina ágæta ok með þeim hætti, at ein eik mikil stóð í höllinni ok limar trésins með fögrum blómum stóðu út um ræfur hallarinnar, en leggrinn stóð niðr í höllina, ok kölluðu þeir þat barnstokk.*"⁵⁸⁶
(King Vqlsung built a glorious hall in this fashion; a huge oak stood in the middle of the hall, and the branches of the tree with fair blossoms stretched out through the roof of the hall, and the trunk stood down in the hall, and they called the tree Barnstokk [Child-tree]). In this instance, the tree seems to be closer to a representation of Yggdrasill, adding to Vqlsung's hall an otherworldly decoration and disposition. In any case, the saga evidence of trees standing inside halls is too scant to justify any conclusions about this being an unusual form of decorating a hall or a literary motif to grant the halls of some rulers with a godly attribute, maybe stressing their godly lineage.

Hallar and *skálar* are not described at length in the literary sources. Their main role was as symbols of power, because he who could afford to own a hall most probably was able to afford throwing a costly feast. Hence they had to be decorated magnificently and stocked with drinks when it was the time to hold a feast. They are symbols of power

⁵⁸⁵ *Hrólfr* XLI, p. 82.

⁵⁸⁶ *Vqls* II, p. 113.

due to the ornaments that are displayed in them, but most of all because of the activities that take place within them.⁵⁸⁷

4.2- SKYTNINGAR AND HJÚKÓLFAR

In chapter 83 of *Laxdæla saga*,⁵⁸⁸ it is told that a group of merchants arrive in Iceland around the year 1000. The saga explains that “*Þetta sumar kom skip í Dqgurðarness ok settisk þar upp. Bolli tók til vistar í Tungu tólf kaupmenn; váru þeir þar um vetrinn, ok veitti Bolli þeim allstórmannliga.*”⁵⁸⁹ (That summer a ship came to Dqgurðarness and it was drawn ashore there. Bolli lodged twelve merchants in Tunga; they remained there during the winter, and Bolli provided for them very magnificently.) In the *Íslendinga sqgur*, it is common to find similar occurrences of a man providing accommodation for a group of foreign merchants in Iceland and in Norway. On most occasions the accommodation was provided by a rich or powerful person whose farm and income allowed him to have surplus enough to host a group of merchants. However, in Norway, with the advent of the Hanseatic League and the increase in international trade, the number of merchants looking for a place to lodge in must have also increased. And as trading-towns grew in size and importance, the floating population accompanying such growth must have also increased beyond the local population’s capacity to lodge them in their houses. As a consequence of the increase of the floating population a new kind of establishment was required in order to provide the travelers with accommodation, food and, drink. These establishments were called *skytningar* and are rarely mentioned by name in our literary sources; though it is possible find several allusions to them in the legal corpus. *OGNS* defines the *skytningar* as “*samliv av personer som gjøre sammenskud av det fornødne til deres beVortning med*

⁵⁸⁷ The feasts that took place inside the halls will be studied in the following chapter.

⁵⁸⁸ Chapters LXXIX-LXXXVIII of *Laxd* are also known as *Bolla þátrr*.

⁵⁸⁹ *Laxd* LXXXIII, 236.

mad og drikke.”⁵⁹⁰ (cohabitation of persons who gather to amuse themselves with food and drink.) *IED* tells us that they are “a ‘scot-house,’ an inn or club, where each guest paid or contributed his own scot or shot (*skot*), whence the name; *skytningr* and *hjúkólfr* are synonymous.”⁵⁹¹ *Hjúkólfr*, are defined as “*samling, sammenkomst af flere mennesker i et hus til selskabelig glæde*”⁵⁹² (a meeting, a gathering of several persons in one house for social enjoyment), or as “a club-house, inn”.⁵⁹³ The few instances in which these establishments are mentioned in our sources⁵⁹⁴ make it difficult to detail their function or any differences there might have been between a *skytningr* and a *hjúkólfr*. Since it seems impossible to define them in twentieth-century categorical terms I have decided to leave both terms untranslated in my study.

In this section I will analyze the references to *skytningar* as well as the laws referring to the consumption and sale of alcoholic beverages in them. As mentioned above, literary and legal references to these establishments are quite scarce, but at the same time they are enlightening about the circumstances of alcohol-trade in the Norwegian medieval period.

Taking into account that the creation of *skytningar* was a result of the urbanization process, it comes as no surprise that there is virtually no reference to this kind of establishment in Iceland, as the country did not develop market towns until the early-modern period. *Víga-Glúms saga*, most probably composed in the first half of the thirteenth century and preserved in full in a mid fourteenth-century manuscript, contains

⁵⁹⁰ *OGNS, skytningr.*

⁵⁹¹ *IED, skytningr.*

⁵⁹² *OGNS, hjúkólfr.*

⁵⁹³ *IED, hjúkólfr.*

⁵⁹⁴ Apart from a few references to *skytningar* and *hjúkólfr* in the law corpus, *skytningar* are mentioned only in four sagas: *ÓK* II, p. 205 *Ísl* LXXIX, pp. 342-43, *Laxd* LXXIII, p. 212 and, *Glúm* XXI, p. 68. (See *OrðT*, *skytningr*: the term appears two times in *Laxd*. And once in *Glúm*). *Hjúkólfr* do not appear at all in the literary sources (see *OrðT*, *hjúkólfr* and the index to *Sturlunga saga*). This information was compiled using the *OrðT*, and the indexes of *Heimskringla*, *Sturlunga saga* and the *Fornaldar sqgur*. The *KLNM* does not provide any examples of *skytningar* apart from that in *OK*.

the only reference to an Icelandic *skytningr*.⁵⁹⁵ The saga narrates that, at some point during the late tenth century while at Arngrímr's farm "einn dag spurði Arngrímr Steinólfr, ef hann vildi fara með honum á Grund ofan til skytnings ok vera þar nætr tvær eða þrjár."⁵⁹⁶ (One day Arngrímr asked Steinólfr if he wanted to go with him to Grund down to the *skytningr* and stay there two or three nights.) *IED* dubs this instance of an Icelandic *skytningr* as "suspicious".⁵⁹⁷ The lexicographers do not specify why its veracity should be doubted, but it must be either because the scene takes place in Northern Iceland (in Eyjafjörðr) or because, being the only reference to such an establishment in Iceland, it might seem of a doubtful nature and an invention of the author. However, Grund was located near a *kaupangr*, or market place (in the area nowadays occupied by Akureyri, the second largest city in Modern Iceland) and we should not discard the possibility of a *skytningr* being located there in order to lodge the foreign merchants visiting the marketplace. As Jónas Kristjánsson puts it "*Vera má, að skytningur hafði verið haldinn á Grund, er mikil drykkjarföng höfðu borizt þangað frá útlöndum.*"⁵⁹⁸ (it could be that there was a *skytningr* at Grund, where many drinks were brought from abroad.) Regardless of the historicity of this reference to a *skytningr* in Eyjafjörðr, the passage in *Víga-Glúms saga* gives us some clues about the way in which *skytningar* were perceived during the first half of the thirteenth century - when the saga was composed. In this episode, while at his farm, Arngrímr asks Steinólfr to go to a *skytningr* for a couple of days. This might be because *skytningar* were places where people could gather and socialize. Also, as in them people were expected to pay for their own food and drink this would free a person from the economic burden of having to provide friends with drinks for several nights. This last would explain why Arngrímr chooses to leave his own farm and look for accommodation for himself and his guest

⁵⁹⁵ The *skytningar* mentioned in *Ísl* LXXIX, p. 342-43 and *Laxd* LXXIII, p. 212 refer to Norwegian establishments.

⁵⁹⁶ *Glúm* XXI, p. 68-69.

⁵⁹⁷ *IED*, *skytningr*.

⁵⁹⁸ *Glúm* XXI, p. 68, fn. 1.

elsewhere. *Skytningar* could also have been perceived as places where the locals could go for a couple of days to trade with foreign merchants. Another possibility is that, since alcohol was scarce and expensive to produce or buy, not every farmer could afford to have a stock of alcohol. So, *skytningar* might have been the places where not so rich farmers went when they wanted to enjoy a drink without having to purchase or produce a whole barrel at once.

With the sole exception of this previous reference to a *skytningr* in Iceland, the rest of the sources refer to *skytningar* or *hjúkólfar* in Norwegian marketplaces.⁵⁹⁹ In his *Óláfs saga kyrra*, Snorri Sturluson provides a good description of the circumstances in which these establishments began to flourish in Norway. This saga takes place between the years of 1067 and 1093, during the reign of Óláfr Haraldsson *kyrri*, which was a period of peace and prosperity in the country. As can be expected during a period of harmony, Snorri tells that; “*um daga Óláfs konungs hófusk mjök kaupstaðir í Noregi, en sumir settusk at upphafi. Óláfr konungr setti kaupstað í Björgyn. Gerðisk þar brátt mikit setr auðigra manna ok tilsiglingar kaupmanna af qðrum lqndum.*”⁶⁰⁰ (In the days of King Óláfr marketplaces grew fast in Norway and some new ones were established. King Óláfr set up a marketplace in Bergen. Soon many wealthy men settled there and merchants from other lands took their wares to that place.) As a result of this increase in trade and in the number of foreign merchants, the customs and organization of the country started to change, but also, as shall be expected, this demographic explosion resulted in the fact that “*Á dögum Óláfs konungs hófusk skytningar ok leizludrykkjur í kaupstqðum.*”⁶⁰¹ (In the days of King Óláfr *skytningar* and drinking-bouts developed in the marketplaces.) The increase in the number of *skytningar* and drinking-bouts in marketplaces can be interpreted as a consequence of the large number of merchants, both foreign and local, who required places to lodge and, perhaps, due to the increase in

⁵⁹⁹ *Skytningar* and *hjúkólfar* are not mentioned in DI.

⁶⁰⁰ *ÓK* II, p. 204.

⁶⁰¹ *ÓK* II, p. 205.

the amount of alcohol being imported by these same merchants. An example of this is found in *Orkneyinga saga*, during an episode in Bergen. The saga states that: “*En er þeir kómu til bæjarins, var þar fyrir fjölmenni mikit, bæði norðan ór landi ok sunnan, ok fjöldi af qðrum lqndum, er þangat hafði flutt gæzku mikla. Gengu þeir skipverjar í skytninga at skemmta sér.*”⁶⁰² (When they reached the town there was quite a gathering of people there from the north and south of the country, and many too from overseas, bringing all sorts of good things with them. Kali and his shipmates started having a good time round the taverns.)⁶⁰³

A historical and archaeological example of these *skytningar* in Bergen comes from a runic stick (*runakefli*) which seems to attest *mungát* commerce in the town. This stick, carved with runic inscriptions was most probably sent by one merchant to his partner, and it reads: “*Hafgrími, féлага sínum, sendir Þórir fagr kvedju Guðs ok sína, sannan félagskap ok vináttu. Mart skortir mik, félagi! Ekki er mungátit, engi fiskarnir. Vil ek at þú vitir, en eigi kref þú.*”⁶⁰⁴ (To Hafgrimr, his friend, sends Þórir God’s and his greetings, true fellowship and friendship. Much is lacking (to me), fellow. There is no *mungát* nor fishes. I want you to know, but do not demand them from you). This inscription was most probably sent by a merchant, dealing with *mungát* in the town, to his provider. Similarly, inscription 650, Gullskoen, attests to the trade of corn in Bergen. There are many other inscriptions attesting to the trade of meal, corn and alcohol in Bergen. Some of these inscriptions seem to have been carved in a *skytningar* context, but they would require a study devoted only to them.⁶⁰⁵

It seems that it was possible to lodge both in private houses as well as in *skytningar*. At least in a 1316 law it is stated that “*skal ok engi gardzbondi nea*

⁶⁰² *Orkn LX*, pp131-32.

⁶⁰³ *Orkneyinga saga*, trans. by Hermann Pálsson, p. 110.

⁶⁰⁴ *Norges Inskrifter med de Yngre Runer*, 6, ed. Knirk, James E., 7 vols (Oslo: Norges Almenvitenskapelige Forkningsråd, 1980-90), p 99.

⁶⁰⁵ An excellent study of runic inscriptions concerning sexual affairs and taverns was done by Kristiina Püttsep. See Kristiina Püttsep, *Kjærlighet på Pinne*, (unpublished master of philosophy thesis, Centre for Viking and Medieval Studies, University of Oslo, 2003).

*bæarmadr [byggia uttlendum manni lengr hus sinn [i senn en half manadar leighv ok aldri lengr hinum sama samflæyt en .vi. vikr.]*⁶⁰⁶ (No garth⁶⁰⁷-owner or townsfolk shall [lodge foreigners in their place for more [than half a month and never in successive occasions within 6 weeks.]) The regulation does not state why it was forbidden to house people for extended periods of time. But it is relevant to note that it clearly states that this prohibition extends both to *gardzbonði* and *bæarmadr* (garth-owners and townsfolk) for it means that foreigners lodged both in private houses as well as in establishments designed for that sole purpose. While it is possible to suppose that alcohol was sold at *skytningar*, we do not know if it was also possible to acquire it in private houses.

The legal corpus does not state the existence of any particular kind of building at which alcohol could be sold. From the evidence it seems that anyone who was interested in selling alcoholic beverages could do so, as long as some requisites were met. Before proceeding with the analysis of these requisites, it is necessary to note that most of the Norwegian alcohol sale regulations were recorded during the fourteenth century, when the Hanseatic trading-towns as well as the import of German alcohol were at their peak.

A law passed in 1358 by King Hákon Magnússon might serve as a good example to start our analysis, as it clearly phrases all the requisites a person should meet in order to sell alcohol. The law states that:

*Skulu oc engir menn viin tappa utan i staderens kellare. huat manne sem huer er eda huat bref huer hefir af os. oc at þat blifr adr sætt af radzmonnum oc gialdkyra huat er þat skal gialda.*⁶⁰⁸

⁶⁰⁶ NGL III, 124. *Kong Haakon Magnussöns Retterbod om Kjøbstevne i Byerne*; Bergen, 1316, 124.

⁶⁰⁷ Garth is defined by the *OED* as “a small piece of enclosed ground, usually beside a house or other building, used as a yard, garden, or paddock.” (*OED*, garth) The *OED* also states that it is a cognate of the Old Norse term *garðr*, therefore I have chosen ‘garth’ as the most accurate translation for this term. On some occasions the word *garðr* might refer to any enclosed space or construction, roofed or not, adjacent to a house, but not necessarily to a house, as the sources differentiate these terms. Examples of this are “*at halda vord af garde sinum æda husum*” (NGL III, p. 166) (to keep watch over their garths or houses) and “*at halda vord af garde sinum eda husum*” (NGL III, p. 177) (to keep watch over their garths or houses).

⁶⁰⁸ NGL III, p. 177. *Kong Haakon Magnussöns Retterbod, indeholdende Privilegier for Oslo*; Oslo, January 22, 1358.

(No man shall serve wine from without the town's cellars, regardless of who that man is or of whichever letters he has [received] from us; and that beforehand, the lawmen and the king's rent-master must set how much should be paid [for it].)

This statute gives notice about three alcohol sale facts that are confirmed elsewhere in the law corpus. First, it mentions the existence of *staderens kellare*, which are interpreted as “*byens vinkjælder*”⁶⁰⁹ (town's wine-cellars), from which the imported beverage was probably distributed to the town. Second, it states that the price at which these beverages were to be sold at *skytningar* were state-regulated. And third, that anyone who wanted to (and paid the required tax) could sell alcohol so that *skytningar* could be held at private homes and/or garths. But let us now discuss the other bits of evidence we have for these three facts.

The previously mentioned 1358 law stipulates that “*skulu oc engir menn viin tappa utan i staderens kellare*” (No man shall serve wine from without the town's cellars). This kind of ordinance was not new to the merchants as just 13 years before Hákon Magnússon's law, King Magnús Eiríksson passed a decree in almost the exact same terms. In it he states that

*Skulu ok eingir mæn vin tappa utan i stadarens kællare ok at þet værdr adr sætt af logmanne radhmonnon gialkyra hvat er þet skal gialda.*⁶¹⁰

(No man shall serve wine other than that of the town's cellars and [never] before the lawmen and the king's rent-master have set how much should be paid [for it].)

The town's cellars appear to have been, more than cellars, toll offices where imported goods were priced and taxed by the crown before the garth-owners and the townsfolk could acquire them. Accordingly, the crown forbade merchants to sell any wares that had not been previously taken to the town's cellars: “*Firibiodom wer ok ollom gæstkomnun monnom at fara a land vt med nokkrom varninge at selia han eda manga þar vt.*”⁶¹¹ (We also forbid all guest-comers [foreigners] to disembark with any wares

⁶⁰⁹ NGLGlos, *kellari*.

⁶¹⁰ NGL III, p. 166. *Kong Magnus Erikssöns Retterbod om Vaabensyn i Jamteland*; Bergen, March 15, 1345.

⁶¹¹ NGL III, p. 166.

for selling or for trading.) This was not a veto on foreign trade but just a measure to control imports and to ensure that they were properly taxed before being sold to the townspeople. The prohibition to trade any wares without them first being taxed might be somehow based on a law passed much earlier by King Hákon Magnusson I in 1316.

This reads:

Skulu vtslendzskir men aller hafa upskipat innan atta dagha hit fyrsta sidan þeir hafa atlagu orlof fenget [...] vin ok bior. miod oc mungaut. hunang oc [...] allar annar varnengar uttan þungga varnnengh skipizt upp i gardz budir ok kellara i þen gard sem hver hefir ser.⁶¹²

[All foreigners shall have disembarked their wares within the first eight days after they have received their leave to do so [...] wine and *bjórr*; *mjqðr*, and *mungát*, honey and [...] all other wares that have not been taxed shall be disembarked into the garth's booths and cellars in that garth which we own.]

As we can see, this regulation applies not only to wine, but to all kind of beverages (and to all wares in general) imported to Norway. As we saw in Chapter 2, once the taxes had been paid and the quality of the wares was checked, they were priced by the king's men and were then ready to be sold in public houses.

The fact that, unlike this 1316 statute, the previous laws stipulate that no wine other than that coming from the town's cellars should be served without mentioning other kinds of beverages does not mean that foreign *mjqðr*, *mungát* or *bjór* were not taxed. Their absence from these stipulations might imply that, unlike wine, these drinks could be both imported or locally produced, so that they could be sold even if they did not come from the town's cellar. But as we can see in this last ordinance from King Hákon Magnússon I, all foreign wares were to be taxed. Unfortunately for the local garth-owners this did not mean that the local produce to be sold at *skytningar* was not excised. A law passed by King Hákon Magnússon in 1377 attests the toll imposed on local brews:

Item um tha menn alla, kalla æder konor, er föra mallt æder mummgatt i byq aff hærade till theff at bruga that her, och thappa her utt affter, wære sackader sinni halffre marck huar thera, than kaupir æder sælir,

⁶¹² NGL III, p. 125. *Kong Haakon Magnussöns Retterbod om Kjøbstevene i Byerne*; Bergen, 1316.

*oc sua thar husbondr er thar lær æder byger sinn ollgongenn till, oc upptæktit allt that qlætt oc brug, er sua finnst med fullom sænendum.*⁶¹³

[Item, about all people, male or female who bring malt or *mungát* in the city's jurisdiction in order to brew here, and serve it here afterwards, we charge each one of these, who buy or sell, with half a mark; and also to the garth-master who there instructs or lends money for *ql*-production, and all *ql* and brews shall be confiscated if that [lack of payment] is found with full truth.)

The toll on local products was, as we can see, of half a mark for *ql*, *mungát* and any other brews. And the taxation was not only imposed on those who sold the product, but also on those who brewed it or contributed with money in order to finance the business. Ten years later King Hakon passed a different law, establishing the tax per unit of malt used to brew. In it he states that “*item at heitu vider [vnder hueria .ij. pund heitta gialde øyri.*”⁶¹⁴ (item, for brewing it shall be such, for each 2 pounds of [malt used for] brewing an *aura* shall be paid.) However, wine, as a foreign product, was subject to a heavier tax than local brews. This might have been a measure taken by the king to protect the local market and brewers from the cheaper prices of the German products. Accordingly, in 1282 there was a toll which “*vinnumenn æyri vndir vinfat æða .xx. aska kerald ok þaðan af minna ok smere eru*”⁶¹⁵ (labourers [pay] one *eyrir* for each wine-barrel or 20 *askr*⁶¹⁶ cask, and thence less the smaller they are) while the same law applies a tax of “*fimm penninga veghna undir huern pundz þungha æða biortunnv ef þeir vinna eptir endilongum [bryggium ok bæ varum. en halfan æyri fyrir lest hueria er þeir vinna up i garða or skipum.*”⁶¹⁷ (five pennies on behalf of each pound in weight [of malt?] or for each *bjórr*-barrel if they work along the piers and in our town, and half an *eyrir* more when they work in garths out of the ships.) This tax, applied to those

⁶¹³ NGL III, pp. 196-97. *Kong Haakon Magnussöns Retterbod om Handelen og Taxterne i Nidaros*; Nidaros, January 24, 1377.

⁶¹⁴ NGL III, p. 143. *Kong Haakon Magnussöns Retterbod om Udlændingers Kjøb og Varers Salg. Udateret (Uvist om af denne Konge eller af Haakon Magnussön II)* Not dated, and it is not known if it was passed by King Hákon Magnússon or by King Hákon Magnússon II.

⁶¹⁵ NGL III, p. 15. *Kong Erik Magnussöns Retterbod om Handel og Taxter I Bergen*; Bergen, September 16, 1282.

⁶¹⁶ *Askr* and its probable use as a standard measure for wine trading have been discussed in chapter 2. 4.

⁶¹⁷ NGL III, p. 15. *Kong Erik Magnussöns Retterbod om Handel og Taxter I Bergen*; Bergen, September 16, 1282.

retailing in garths, shipyards and piers shows that the levy on wine was much heavier than that imposed on *q/* or *bjórr*. This was, perhaps, due to the fact that these last beverages could be produced locally.

Actually, the prices for German *q/* were set by the king, who provided a maximum charge per volume.⁶¹⁸ So, the measure of German *q/* was not to be served over the maximum price of three English pence, otherwise both drinker and server were to be fined half a mark each and the seller would have all his product confiscated:

*Item at tydysk oll alltt skall thappast fir [tria peninga ænnzska, huer rett mott marckar kannu. Enn hver er dyra sæll oc sua hinn er dyra kaupir se secktter sina halfua marck huar thera oc uptqcktt qllet, thann samma thunna, thar finzst medt thi.*⁶¹⁹

(Item, that all German *q/* shall be served for three English pence, in any manner of known currency. And he who sells it for more and also he who buys it for more shall pay a fine of half mark each and the *q/* as well as any barrels that are found are to be confiscated.)

While it is possible to imagine the reasons for a garth-owner to sell his *q/* at a price higher than that established by law, the circumstances under which a consumer would be willing to pay a higher price for it are enigmatic. In any case, the price regulation on foreign beverages might have been a measure to ensure that the local products would have a competitive price in the market. And, at least for some local merchants, the risk of having all their alcohol stock confiscated if they breached this law would have been the equivalent of putting them out of business, due to the amount of money they would require to create a new cellar.

The King was the ultimate recipient of the taxes imposed on alcoholic beverages and, as we have already seen, he might have also received important amounts of alcoholic beverages coming from the confiscation courts.⁶²⁰ Most of the alcohol sale regulations, as can be perceived in the previously mentioned regulations, included confiscation in case of disobedience, usually phrased as “*hver sem þat gerrir bæti*

⁶¹⁸ The alcohol-prices set by the Crown for each of the beverages have already been discussed in chapter 2.

⁶¹⁹ NGL III, pp. 196-97. *Kong Haakon Magnussöns Retterbod om Handelen og Taxterne i Nidaros*; Nidaros, January 24, 1377.

⁶²⁰ See Chapter 2.

konungi fim morkum silfrs ok se biorin uptækur."⁶²¹ (each one who does that pays the King a compensation of five silver marks and [has] his *bjórr* confiscated.) Similarly, after the products were priced by the lawmen it is usually mentioned that "*skall logman oc raaidmen æigha af hvario winfathe er þappast til utsalo fym stob vins.*"⁶²² (the lawman and counselors are to have, from each wine-barrel that is to be served for sale, five cups of wine.) We do not know how much or how often these confiscations took place or how much the lawmen collected as tax or wages in beverages. However, these products must have been used to supply the royal cellar and to provide the royal feasts with enough beverages. The king himself also seems to have made some profit from his beverage surplus by establishing *hjúkólfr* on his estates. An example of these royal *skytningar* is to be found in *Íslendinga saga*, when in 1230 Jón and Gizurr spend Christmas at the king's court, but are said to have lodged at a *hjúkólfr* located in the king's garth. They "*váru með konungi um jól sem aðrir skutilsveinar. En síðan gengu þeir í hjúkólf á konungsgarði. Þat var eitt kveld nær geisladegi, er þeir mágar kómu ór hjúkólfinum ok váru mjök drukknir.*"⁶²³ (were with the king during Christmas, as other pages were. And after that they went to the *hjúkólfr* in the king's garth. It happened one evening near Geisli Day⁶²⁴ that the cousins came from the *hjúkólfr* and were very drunk.) This *hjúkólfr* in the king's garth was most surely owned by the crown and provided with drinks from the royal cellars and probably stocked with beverages both bought and confiscated by the king's men.

⁶²¹ NGL III, p. 124. *Kong Haakon Magnussöns Retterbod om Kjøbstevene i Byerne*; Bergen, 14 November 1316). The same price and penalty was established by the king one day after for *bjórr* trade in Tunsberg and Oslo, see (NGL III, p. 127. *Kong Haakon Magnussöns Retterbod om Kjøbstevene i Byerne*; Bergen, November 15, 1316).

⁶²² NGL III, p. 135. *Kong Haakon Manussöns Retterbod om Vintapning i Bergen* (not Dated).

⁶²³ *Ísl* LXXIX, p. 342-43.

⁶²⁴ *Geisladagr*. (Beam-day.) This festivity is not well documented and its meaning is unclear. The *IED* mentions that " it is probably a rendering of Epiphany, though it is not used of that very day, which is called *Þrettándi*, but of the seventh day after" (*IED*, *geisli*) while *OGNS* equates it with St. Hilary's Day, on the 13th of January (*OGNS*, *Geisladagr*); Árni Björnsson does not list it among the Icelandic Feasts and Holidays (see Árni Björnsson).

As mentioned before, by the late fourteenth century anyone who wished to do so could sell alcohol and, most probably own a *skytningr* as long as he or she paid the corresponding taxes, served products from the town's cellars, had their products valued by the lawmen and sold them at the price established by the Crown. But a new requisite appears for the first time in the law corpus, according to this new law those who serve alcohol must own a building where they can serve their drinks. At least in this law passed by Hákon Magnússon it is stated that “*Fyrst at uphaffue at engom manne. utlændskum ne indlændskum huarcke kall ne konno. loffuett æder thoolest at haffua nockorm ollthap i bqq warum huarcke winn miod ne biorr æder mumgatt, wthan thennom æinum sem garda æiga.*”⁶²⁵ (To begin with, that no person, foreign or local, man or woman, is allowed or tolerated to have an *ql*-serving⁶²⁶ whether the wares are wine, *mjqðr*, *bjórr* or *mungát*, in the town, except those [persons] who own a garth.) We do not know if this was the first time that a law was passed in order to promote drinking in an enclosed space. As we can see from the redaction of the ordinance, it was not important what kinds of alcohol were being sold, the main concern was gathering all drinkers within a limited space. This ordinance could have been an attempt to stop people from selling alcohol on the streets and thus to avoid public drunkenness or to keep people from drinking on the streets. Whether or not this was the first time that the Crown attempted to control drinking on the streets, it was surely a law that strengthened the position of *skytningar* as places where people were to gather in order to drink. The preservation of public order by establishing garths as the only places where alcohol was to be sold may have not been the principal interest of the crown in passing this law; after all it is easier to tax a well located establishment than a merchant selling his product on the streets.

⁶²⁵ NGL III, pp. 196-97. *Kong Haakon Magnussöns Retterbod om Handelen og Taxterne i Nidaros*; Nidaros, January 24, 1377.

⁶²⁶ *Ollthap* (*ql*-serving). Even though the word makes reference only to *ql*, it seems to be a generic drink for serving any other kind of alcoholic beverage.

A law passed by King Eiríkr Magnússon on September 16, 1282 in Bergen could be a forerunner of this attempt to encourage drinking within a confined space as it proved more profitable to the Crown. This law states that

*Skolu ok husbændr hafa biorsaulu ef þeim likar, ok sele bollan fyrir fim ok ærtug. Þeir sem æiga garða ok isitia ok olgogn eiga sealfir, ok sva hinir sæm læigha garda ok isitia ok ologn hafva, bolle mungatz skal gialda fimtan penningha veghna, æda .x. svarta mædan þeir ganga.*⁶²⁷

(Garth-masters may sell *bjórr* if they like, and sell a bowl for five and an *qrtug*.⁶²⁸ Those who own a garth and seating places and have their own drinking vessels as well as those who rent a garth and seating places and drinking vessels shall pay fifteen *penningar* on behalf of [it], or pay 10 black [coins]⁶²⁹ whilst they do so.)

Again, this law states that whoever wants to can sell alcoholic beverages. The ownership of a building, drinking vessels and seating places is not a requisite to do so as long as an extra tax, apart from that imposed on the beverages, is paid. While this might have discouraged the creation of *hjúkólfar*, later on, the ban on street alcohol-sales might have left the alcohol-traders with no other choice but to establish *skytningar* and pay the extra price for their privilege.

But what kind of behavior was to be expected among the *skytningar* patrons? There are not many references to what actually went on in these establishments, and in most occasions they refer to brawls. Let us take a look at these sources.

Skytningar are portrayed as places in which people could overindulge in drinking and they are, accordingly, the scene of drunken fights. Chapter 104 of *Sverris saga*, written around 1300, presents King Sverrir's view on the issues of public drunkenness. In it the King makes a speech, generally referred to as "A Speech Against Drunkenness", where he presents his point of view on the moral relaxation of society

⁶²⁷ NGL III, p. 16. *Kong Erik Magnussöns Retterbod om Handel og Taxter i Bergen*; Bergen, Sept 16, 1282.

⁶²⁸ *Qrtug*. The exact amount that an *qrtug* comprised is not clear. It was, perhaps, equivalent to twenty *penningar*. (See *IED*, *örtug*.)

⁶²⁹ *Svarta [penningar]* (black money). *NGLGlos* explains that *svarta penningar* refers to "særskilt (daarlig), omend almindelig udbredt slags mynt, der i 1282 ventedes eller haabedes efterhaanden at ville gaa ud af cirkulationen; ogsaa i andre lande betegnedes som 'sorte penge' (monnaies noires, zwarte penningen, black money) en stærkt kobberblandet myntsort, hvori sølvet næsten var forsvindende." (*NGLGlos*, *penningr.*) (a special (terrible) universally widespread type of coin, which in 1282 had already or was about to go out of circulation; in other countries it was also known as 'black money', a kind of coin with a strong copper content, where silver was almost absent).

due to alcohol consumption. King Sverrir pronounces his speech during one summer in which there were many German merchants in Bergen, bringing large amounts of wine “*Suðr-menn hofðu flutt þangat vin mikit. Sva at þa var i Biorgyn eigi dyra vin en mungat.*”⁶³⁰ (the southerners [i.e. the Germans] had brought there a large amount of wine, so that there in Bergen wine was not more expensive than *mungat*.) The consequence of the decrease in the wine-price is that the townsmen overindulge in it, and the story ends up with the death of several men as a result of their not being used to drinking large amounts of that expensive beverage. The text states that

*þat sumar var oc morg onnur uspecð ger við dryckiona. EiN maðr var sa af Birkibeinum er han var sva vitlaus af dryckio at han liop or hollinni mille ok konungs-stofu. oc þottiz hann laupa a fund. oc fecc bana. AnnaR liop af bryGio i konungsgarði oc drvcnaði.*⁶³¹

(That summer there were also many other sources of unrest related to the drink. One man, who was one of the Birkibeinar, was so witless with the drink that he jumped between the hall and the King’s sitting-room. And he thought that he could leap over the narrow passage. And he got killed. Another man jumped off the pier in the King’s garth and drowned.)

So, concerned about the events related to the unrest caused by the excess of wine in the city, the King makes a speech in which he expresses his gratitude to all English, Icelandic, Orcadian and Faroese merchants for bringing commodities such as meal, clothes and honey to Norway. At the same time he blames the German merchants for bringing only wine and with it drunkenness to his land.

*En um þyðerska menn er higat ero comnir mikill fiolþi oc með storum scipum oc ælla heþan at flytia smior oc screið er mikil landeyia er at þeiri brotflutningo. en her kemr i staðinn vin er menn hafa til lagz at kaupa hvarir-tvegio minir menn oc bøiar-menn eða caupmen hefir af því caupi mart illt staðit en ecki gott hafa marga her tynt sinu lifi firir þesa soc.*⁶³²

(But about the Germans who come here in large numbers and with large ships in order to acquire butter and dried fish, which is abundant in this land, and which they take to their land, and here to this land comes [they bring] wine, which men have become accustomed to buy for companionship, both my men and the townfolk and the merchants. And because of that they have brought a great harm to this place and nothing good. Many have lost their lives for this reason.)

⁶³⁰ Sv CIII, p. 109.

⁶³¹ Sv CIII, p. 109.

⁶³² Sv CIV, p. 110.

Sverre Bagge argues that as to King Sverrir's "logic in blaming the Germans, one may object that it was probably not too difficult to get drunk on the national product, beer [...] and further that wine must normally have been so expensive that only a small minority could afford to get drunk in that way."⁶³³ As discussed in Chapter 2, the price of wine was excessively higher than those of *ql*, *bjórr* and *mungát*⁶³⁴ and Bagge's assertion seems to be sound when it comes to the lack of possibilities for the common folk to get inebriated with wine. But why then put the blame on wine and the Germans for the increase on drunkenness and moral relaxation? Bagge suggests that it was because "the Germans have imported so much that wine was not more expensive than beer"⁶³⁵ so that "when Sverri combines the attack on the Germans with the attack on drink, it is probably an indication of a general interest in trade and provisions rather than simply a reaction against an acute moral problem."⁶³⁶ Even if *Sverris saga* narrates that there was so much wine so that it became cheaper than *mungát* the import of large quantities of wine so that its price was reduced so drastically seems quite unlikely. Apart from the literary evidence, Bagge does not offer any documentation for this fact and so far I have not found any document (charters nor laws) proving that that was actually the case in the late twelfth century. Thus, another probable interpretation of this passage of *Sverris saga* is that either the King or the scribe that produced the text referred freely to alcoholic beverages under the generic term of "wine", which is mentioned only once, at the beginning of the speech, and is also the only drink brought up in the discourse. This would also explain the blame on German merchants, who were not only importing wine but also (and mostly) beer. We shall keep in mind that

⁶³³ Sverre Bagge, *From Gang Leader to the Lord's Anointed: Kingship in Sverris Saga and Hákonar Saga Hákonarsonar* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1996), p. 72.

⁶³⁴ Bagge adds that in 1306, around the time that the saga was committed to parchment, "the price of a cup of the most expensive wine was sixteen pence, i.e. seventy-five kilograms of grain or one third of a cow. This means that serving fifty-four persons one cup each of this wine would cost the value of an average farm in Western Norway. The price of the cheapest wine was one half of this." (Bagge, p. 72, fn. 62).

⁶³⁵ Bagge, p. 72.

⁶³⁶ Bagge, p. 72.

Sverrir's speech was not against wine, but against drunkenness in general and against the Germans in particular; and for this purposes one drink is as good as the other. However, if the passage is indeed historical, then it serves only to prove that twelfth-century Norwegians were not used to consume wine and would also help us to understand why, later on, imported alcohol was so heavily taxed and why the price of alcohol was regulated by the Crown.

The only thing we can assume almost for sure is that with the increase of Hanseatic trade more *skytningar* must have come into existence in order to house foreign merchants and that, together with it, the offer and demand for foreign alcoholic beverages must have increased as well as the number of merchants involved in such business. But only a few sources let us glimpse what happened inside these *skytningar*; and the way in which the laws and sagas portray the *skytningar* is very similar to what King Sverrir describes in his speech. For example, an undated law passed by King Hákon Magnússon⁶³⁷, stating who could serve alcohol and where alcohol could be served states that: "*Item lagligom gordom ma oll tappaz oc skullu gordzbonderne sielffue lade tappa øll om the villia eller skilrika dandekonor som the villia sielffue forsvara. En ingen frillor eder løyso quinnor skullu øll tappa.*"⁶³⁸ (Item, by law in garths only the garth-master himself is allowed to and must serve *ql* if he wishes, or [this can be done] by clearly respectable women that he wants to answer for. And no prostitutes or loose women shall serve *ql*.) The presence of prostitutes at *skytningar* is also referred to in the fourteenth-century *Króka-Refs saga* where Grani, one of King Harald Gráfeldr's closest men, is said to be a great womanizer. Once, when he is absent from the court at Trondheim everyone agrees that the most probable explanation is that

⁶³⁷ As the amendment to the law is undated it is impossible to know whether it was passed by King Hákon V Magnússon (ruling ca. 1299-1319) or by King Hákon VI Magnússon (ruling ca. 1343-1380) or by King Hákon Magnusson (ruling ca. 1093-1094).

⁶³⁸ NGL III, p. 210. *Kong Haakon Magnussöns Retterbod om Forholdene i Bergen*. (Not Dated).

he “*mun hann hafa farit um herbergi at leita sér kvenna.*”⁶³⁹ (must have gone to the *herbergi*⁶⁴⁰ to find himself some women.) This episode may well be referring to what might have been a common practice at the time the saga was written and perhaps also at the time in which the events in the saga took place. We do not know exactly when the saga was composed but it has been dated to the fourteenth century. So, if the previously mentioned law against prostitutes serving at *skytningar* was indeed passed by King Hákon V Magnusson - ruling from ca. 1299-1319 - in the early fourteenth century this could make the law almost contemporary with the writing of *Króka-Refs saga*. *Orkneyinga saga* mentions a *skytningr* in Bergen, and it stresses that: “*Unnr hét húsfreyja gqfug, er garðinn átti, þann er þeir drukku í.*”⁶⁴¹ (The tavern they were drinking at belonged to a lady of good family called Unn.)⁶⁴² The fact that it is stressed that the owner was a lady of good birth might be a historical reflection of the laws concerning who was able to serve in the *skytningar*.

Another of the issues that bothered King Sverrir were the brawls derived from drunkenness. Since *skytningar* were places where foreign merchants gathered they were also places where trade took place and transactions were settled. Problems might have arisen while reaching a commercial agreement and this could have well lead to some quarrels, as in the one attested in *Arons saga*, composed towards the middle of the fourteenth century but relating events of the first half of the thirteenth century.⁶⁴³ In this saga it is said that:

*Þórðr drakk í skytningi, þar sem drykkur var áfengur. [...] En Þórðr sat eftir ok nökkurir handgengnir menn. En er á leið náttina, sló í kappmæli með þeim ok áhöld, svá at þeir börðust með hornum ok skriðljósum. Þórðr var harðgerr maðr ok aflamikill. Urðu þeir mjök vanhluta, er í móti váru, ok urðu bæði bláir ok blóðugir.*⁶⁴⁴

⁶³⁹ *Krók* XVII, p. 154.

⁶⁴⁰ *Herbergi* can mean either a ‘room’ or an ‘inn’. However, in the saga corpus, the term refers more often to a room in a house than to an inn. In this instance the meaning seems to be clearly ‘an inn’.

⁶⁴¹ *Orkn* LX, p. 132.

⁶⁴² *Orkneyinga saga*, trans. by Hermann Pálsson, pp. 110.

⁶⁴³ John Porter, ‘*Arons Saga Hjqrleifssonar*’, in *Medieval Scandinavia*, ed. by Pulsiano, pp. 21-22 (p. 21).

⁶⁴⁴ *Ar* XIX, p. 274.

(Þórðr drank at the *skytningr*, there where the drinking was intoxicating. [...] And Þórðr sat after and then some officers of the king. And in the course of the night approached he got into a dispute with them and they fought. They hit each other with horns and lanterns. Þórðr was a hardy man and very strong. They were very badly beaten, those who were against him, and became both black [bruised] and bloody.)

Skytningar fights are also portrayed as being a mere exchange of arguments, as is the case in *Sneglu-Halla þáttr* when “*Konungr gekk úti um stræti ok fylgdin með honum, [...] Þeir heyrðu í eitt herbergi deild mikla. Þar voru at sútari ok járnsmiðr, ok þar næst flugusk þeir á. Konungrinn nam staðar ok sá á um stund.*”⁶⁴⁵ (the King went out to the street and his followers went with him. [...] They heard a great quarrel at a certain *herbergi*. It was a tanner and an iron-smith, and they were about to jump at one other. The king stopped in that place and watched for a while.)

In theory it was the taverner’s duty to keep his *skytningr* in peace, as attested in an addendum to some regulations on *skytningar* and alcohol prices passed by Magnús Eiríksson. This states that: “*Þat vilium ok at huar sæm fyrnæmst sakar þryosdko at halda vord af garde sinum æda husum gialde fiora mærkr.*”⁶⁴⁶ (we want this also; that those who for the sake of sullen obstinacy neglects to keep watch over their garths or houses pay [a fine of] four marks.) And again, in 1358 a law was passed by Hákon Magnusson stating “*Þat vilium ver ok at huer sem firirnæmzt sakar þriodsko at halda vord af garde sinum eda husum gialdi .xij, aurar.*”⁶⁴⁷ (we want this also; that those who for the sake of sullen obstinacy neglect to keep watch over their garths or houses pay 12 *aurar*.) The recurrence of this law might imply that lack of order both in *skytningar* or garths and in private homes where alcohol was sold was a continuous problem. We have no documents attesting to the intervention of the state to control brawls in places where alcohol was sold. As a matter of fact, *Sneglu-Halla þáttr* records the only

⁶⁴⁵ *Snegl* III, p. 267.

⁶⁴⁶ *NGL* III, p. 166. *Kong Magnus Erikssöns Retterbod, indeholdende Privilegier for Oslo*; Haalöysa, April 25, 1346.

⁶⁴⁷ *NGL* III, p. 177. *Kong Haakon Magnussöns Retterbod, indeholdende Privilegier for Oslo*; Oslo, January 22, 1358.

instance in which a state figure (the king) is said to witness one such fight, and, as we have seen, it reports that the King did nothing to prevent the fight. Maybe, according to the mentality of the age one should have expected the king to intervene and impose his royal authority to keep the peace. However, the lack of action on the part of the king might be part of the several criticisms against the royal figure which characterize this *páttr*.

As mentioned before, we do not know much about what went on at the *skytningar* or about the behaviour the patrons followed inside them. But there is some evidence to confirm that, when the locals left the establishment, there were some breaches to the public order. This comes from a 1295 document which attests not only who were the usual clients of the *skytningar* but also that once they left they followed the same behaviour they followed inside it. Due to this kind of conduct (whatever it was) King Eiríkr Magnússon had “*firirbodet samdrykkiur ædr gilldi leidsagumanna. gullsmida. iærnsmida. Englandz faara. suæina. vinnumanna. heito manna. hæimakuenna ok allar adrar samdrykkiur.*”⁶⁴⁸ (prohibited drinking-gatherings or guilds of skippers, gold-smiths, iron-smiths, England-goers,⁶⁴⁹ servants, labourers, brewers, housemaids and all other drinking-companies.) The fact that the King decided to prohibit guilds and drinking bouts among people of these occupations might attest to the fact that that they were the most common *skytningar* clients or that they were the worst troublemakers when drunk. In the same law King Eiríkr Magnússon ordained that “*utan skytningar vilium ver at halldezst æftir fornnum sidvanda.*”⁶⁵⁰ (we want [people] to behave according to the old custom outside the *skytningar*.) Again, we do not exactly know what the king meant by “*fornnum sidvanda*” (old custom) outside the *skytningar*. He might have made reference to the days in which *skytningar* did not exist and the local patrons drank at home. After all, some of the occupations he refers to seem to be

⁶⁴⁸ NGL III, p. 25. *Kong Erik Magnussöns Retterbod om Forholdene i Bergen*; March 9, 1295.

⁶⁴⁹ Presumably merchants who engaged in international trade.

⁶⁵⁰ NGL III, p. 25.

those of men and women who lived in the same town such as servants, labourers and housemaids; while gold-smiths, iron-smiths and brewers could be foreign, it seems unlikely for them to travel with all their instruments in order to bring their trade to a market-town.⁶⁵¹ The same applies to the England-goers, as the name seems to imply that they were local merchants travelling abroad. All the occupations seem to point toward locals who left the *skytningr*, most probably intoxicated, in order to go home. That is, the law seems to be aimed at controlling the transit of drunken locals on their way home, and to instruct them to keep public order. After all, foreign merchants most probably lodged in the same places they were drinking at, and their drunken behaviour was only of the concern of the inn-keeper who, as we have already seen, was expected to look after his place and keep it in peace. Similarly, *Diplomatarium Islandicum* contains a charter, dated 1323, in Oslo, stating that priests should attend their duties and “en æigi til Çlhusa edr annarrar samdryckiu”⁶⁵² ([not go] to ale-houses or other drinking gatherings).

Finally, the selection of those who were not allowed to gather to drink and were asked to keep public order might not have reflected only the most common *skytningr* customers. If one reviews the occupation list one might find that merchants, skippers, brewers, gold- and iron-smiths also represent the wealthiest members of society; therefore, they were the ones that were able to spend more money on alcohol and thus more likely become more intoxicated and cause trouble.

The development of *skytningar* indubitably caused some changes in the drinking culture. Before the advent of these establishments most of the drinking took place during special occasions and within a drinking hall. Those present were mostly dependants or acquaintances of the chieftain or farmer who owned the hall, and it was the chieftain’s or farmer’s responsibility to provide his guests with all they required

⁶⁵¹ The possibility exists that they were indeed foreign, however in the market town they required a proper space to practice their profession, making it unlikely for them to lodge at a *skytningr*.

⁶⁵² DI II, p. 536.

during their sojourn at his place. His role as the provider helped the host to enhance his reputation, show-off his wealth and, most important, to raise his status in society. But with the advent of *skytningar* now there were no such opportunities to display power; at least not with such largesse as must have been the case in the *hǫll* or *skáli*. Moreover, drinking at the *skytningar* took place at a location where, no matter how rich or powerful the lodger was, he was not the master of the house and he engaged in drinking surrounded, at least partially, by strangers. This change in attitude can be perceived in *Laxdæla saga* in a scene which depicts the behaviour of Bolli, an Icelander, spending the winter at a *skytningr* in Norway. In it is said that:

Brátt fannsk þat, at Bolli myndi vera maðr framgjarn ok vildi vera fyrir qðrum mǫnnum; honum tóksk ok svá, því at maðrinn var qrlátr; fékk hann brátt mikla virðing í Noregi. Bolli hélt sveit um vetrinn í Brándheimi, ok var auðkennt, hvar sem hann gekk til skytninga, at menn hans váru betr búnir at klæðum ok vápnum en annat bæjarfólk; hann skaut ok einn fyrir sveitunga sína alla, þá er þeir sátu í skytningum.⁶⁵³

(Soon it was found that Bolli must be a striving man and that he wanted to be greater than other men; he managed this because the man was open-handed; he soon gained much honour in Norway. Bolli kept a company of men during the winter in Trondheim, and he was recognized whenever he went to the *skytningr* because his men were better clothed and armed than other townsfolk; and he alone paid for the drinks of all his company of men when they sat in *skytningar*.)

This scene depicts the confrontation of the two -different- worlds of the *skáli* and the *skytningr*. Bolli, as a leader in Iceland, is used to act as a host and provide for his men at his *skáli*.⁶⁵⁴ However, when he finds himself at a *skytningr* (and we must remember that there were probably no *skytningar* in Iceland) he displays the same drinking ethos that would be expected from a host in his land. In the *skytningar*, just as in his *skáli*, he feels the obligation to be magnificent and provide for the needs of all his retinue in order to affirm his social status. Hence, he provides his men not only with clothes and weapons, which were the typical gifts that a chieftain offered to his guests, but also supplies his men with drinks. This attitude must have been atypical at a *skytningr*, where men were

⁶⁵³ *Laxd* LXXIII, p. 212-13.

⁶⁵⁴ At the beginning of this section we saw the same Bolli housing twelve foreign merchants and lavishly providing them for the entire winter at his farm in Iceland.

expected to pay for their own share and, perhaps the recognition he gained both in Iceland and Norway was partly due to the extravagance of his generosity.

As we have seen in the previous pages, *skytningar* and *hjúkólfar* seem to be a phenomenon that developed only in Norway, while Iceland continued having *skálar* as the main drinking locations. This might have been due both to the absence of urbanization and low numbers of foreign merchants visiting Iceland, while in Norway trading-towns developed since the Viking Age and grew in size with the advent of the Hanseatic League. To start with, alcoholic beverages could be sold in houses or *skytningar* as well as in the streets or in other public places. The only requisites that had to be covered were first, that the alcohol to be sold had to come from the town's cellars; second, that the beverages were valued by the king's men and; third, that the merchant paid the tax corresponding to the beverage he sold. Later on, perhaps due to the increased imports of alcoholic beverages and the need to keep control over the taxation of local and imported beverages, the sale of alcohol was restricted to *skytningar* and *hjúkólfar*. These establishments seem to have been quite troublesome, so that the state had to regulate the prostitution and breaches of public order that took place in them, imposing fines on those *skytningar* owners or managers who failed to comply.

4.3– OTHER DRINKING PLACES

There were many other places where men drank apart from the *hallar*, *skálar*, *skytningar* or *hjúkólfar*. In a certain way, every occasion on which men gathered could be taken as an excuse to have some drinks, even if it was not within the context of a wedding, a funeral or a seasonal feast;⁶⁵⁵ or at a royal *hǫll*, at a farmer's *skáli* or at a taverner's *skytningr* or *hjúkólfr*. The literary sources mention a few other circumstances in which men and women treat themselves with alcoholic beverages. These drinking

⁶⁵⁵ Weddings, funerals and seasonal feast will be studied in Chapter 5.

occasions are not mentioned often in the literary corpus, and comprise such gatherings as the *Þing* and *Alþingi* (that is, namely, the local and the national assemblies respectively), battles, and a few lonely drinkers. In this section I analyze what the sources have to tell us about these drinking locations and, when possible, extract some information about the ethos around them.

4.3.1- DRINKING AT THE ÞING

The most important and powerful men of Iceland gathered at both the *Þing* and *Alþingi* during the spring and autumn, and during the summer, respectively, in order to discuss and settle legal matters. During these assemblies, chieftains, lawyers and farmers from all over the country gathered in one place, but, one can not expect that the sole purpose of such an important meeting was to discuss court cases. The *Íslendinga Sögur* portray the assemblies as places where people also gathered to arrange marriages, exchange the latest gossip, display military and economical power, play games, meet old friends and, of course, have a few drinks. As *Laxdóla saga* puts it, during a *þing* in Norway “*Þat þótti skemmtanarfqr at sækja þann fund [...] Þangat var ok kaupstefnu at sækja. Fundr þessi var allfjqlmennur; þar var skemmtan mikil, drykkjur ok leikar ok alls kyns gleði.*”⁶⁵⁶ (Visiting the assembly was considered as a great entertainment [...] There was also a market to visit. This assembly was attended by many people; there was plenty of entertainment, drinking and games and all kinds of merriment.) Other sagas also depict the assemblies as an occasion which people attended looking for festivities and in order to have a good time.⁶⁵⁷ The author of the early fourteenth century *Grettis saga* offers an explanation for these activities during the assemblies on the occasion of a spring *þing* celebrated at Hegranes, in Iceland. He explains that “*Kom fjqlmenni mikit ór qllum heruðum, þeim sem menn áttu þangat at sokja. Sátu menn þar lengi á várit bæði*

⁶⁵⁶ *Laxd* XII, p. 22.

⁶⁵⁷ For example see *Heið* XVII, *Eb* XLI, *Vatn* XXXVII.

*yfir málum ok gleði, því at þá var mart gleðimanna í heruðum.*⁶⁵⁸ (A large gathering came from all the districts, those who had men to prosecute in that place. The men stayed long there during the spring both engaged in legal cases and having merriment, because in that time there were many cheerful men in the districts.) This reference to the festivities at the local assembly (added to the many other ones in which the thing is portrayed as a joyful event) can be interpreted as the way in which medieval Icelanders perceived the atmosphere at the Viking Age *Þing*: a time at which even if there were legal cases to be settled, there were also opportunities for merrymaking. The comment about the fact that “in that time there were many cheerful men in the districts” as an explanation for the merriment at the assembly can also be interpreted as a comment on the political unrest of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries in Iceland. For the author, both the cheerfulness and the men who feasted during the assemblies belong to the past, probably implying that at the time of the composition of the saga the atmosphere was quite different at the *þing*.

However, references to drinking at the assemblies are not so abundant.⁶⁵⁹ This may be due to the fact that for most Icelanders the annual journey to the *Alþingi* was a lengthy one. The national assembly, established in 930 A.D. and celebrated during the summer at Þingvellir, in southwest Iceland, was a young institution. The participants needed to take with them all the provisions they required for their journey and their stay at the *Þing*. Later on, merchants arrived at the assemblies in order to sell their products. But when the assemblies were still quite young, as in the case of a reference to a *Þing* around 960 A.D, we are told that “*Þat var þá hátt, at menn vistuðu sik sjálfir til þings, ok reiddu flestir mali um sǫðla sína.*”⁶⁶⁰ (It was then the custom that men carried their own provisions to the *Þing*, and most men rode with a knapsack on their saddle.) Again,

⁶⁵⁸ *Gr* LXXII, p. 229.

⁶⁵⁹ The most common entertainments at the assemblies, according to the *Íslendinga Sögur*, were ball-games and wrestling matches.

⁶⁶⁰ *Gr* XVI, pp. 45-46.

this allusion to the way ‘things used to be’ can be read as a statement saying that ‘things are no longer that way’ and that men do not need to carry their provisions any more. In any case, if carrying food provisions for a 15-day stay at the *Þing* or at the *Alþingi* can be seen as a troublesome, then transporting by horseback a large volume of alcohol to provide one’s retinue was most surely an ordeal. So, drinking at the *Þing* or *Alþingi* might have not been a common practice during the early stage of these institutions.

The late thirteenth-century *Qlkofra þáttur* tells the story of a merchant called Þórhallr who was nicknamed Qlkofri [Ql-hood] because his main trade was to sell *ql* at the *Alþing*. The *þáttur* reports that “*Hann hafði þá iðju at gera ql á þingum til fjár sér, en af þessi iðn varð hann brátt málkunnigr qllu stórmenni, því at þeir keyptu mest mungát. Var þá sem opt kann verða, at mungátin eru misjafnt vinsæl ok svá þeir, er seldu.*”⁶⁶¹ (He had the business of brewing *ql* at the *þing* in order to make money, and through this business became acquainted with all the great men, because they bought most of the *mungát*. It was, as often happens, that the *mungát* are⁶⁶² not always liked and neither are those who sold it.⁶⁶³) The *þáttur* seems to imply that both the *ql* and the *mungát* were brewed at the site of the *þing* (*gera ql á þingum*). Most probably Qlkofri went from booth to booth selling his brews, as on the only two occasions in which the *Íslendinga sǫgur* mention men actually drinking at the *þing* the scenes takes place at the booths of the chieftains who are attending the assembly. These scenes occur in *Brennu-Njáls saga* and *Gísla saga*; let us review these episodes.

In *Brennu-Njáls saga*, the Njálssons decide to visit the booths of several *goðar* at the *Alþingi* in order to find support for their case. When they start visiting the chieftains, first “*Þeir gengu til búðar Gizurar hvíta ok gengu inn í búðina; Gizurr stóð*

⁶⁶¹ *Qlk I*, p. 83.

⁶⁶² *Mungátin eru* (the *mungát* are). It is interesting to note the plural in this construction, implying that maybe he sold either different types of brews or, perhaps, different kind of *mungát*.

⁶⁶³ As we shall see in Chapter 6, it is giving, not selling, alcoholic beverages that enhanced men’s reputations.

*upp í móti þeim ok það þá sitja ok drekka.*⁶⁶⁴ (they went to the booth of Gizurr the white and went in; Gizurr stood up to receive them and invited them to sit and drink.) In this scene we can well suppose that when Gizurr stood up to welcome them he was already sitting at the *pallr* (cross-bench) drinking with his retinue and was just inviting the newcomers to sit and join the merrymaking. A similar scene follows in the next two visits to other booths, but without any mention of drinking. On these occasions it is only mentioned that the chieftain was sitting at the *pallr* and invited the men to sit. Probably drinking was taking place at these benches. As for the sitting arrangement at the *pallr*, the same saga states in various instances that the chieftain was sitting at the centre of the bench⁶⁶⁵, sometimes on a high-seat.⁶⁶⁶

It seems however that not all instances of drinking at the assemblies were considered as honourable. People might have been expected to sit and drink while they sorted out legal matters, settled agreements and strengthened bonds; but once they started neglecting their duties at the *þing* because of their overindulgence in drinking, then gossip began to spread. Such is the case in *Gísla saga Súrssonar* when, during a spring assembly

*Nú sitja þeir við drykkju, Sýrdolir, en aðrir menn váru at dómum, því at sóknarþing var. Þá kemr maðr inn í búð þeira Haukdola, gassi mikill, er Arnórr hét, ok mælti: 'Allmikil er um yðr Haukdola, er þér gáid einskis annars en at drekka, en vilið eigi koma til dóma, þar sem þingmenn yðrir eigu málum við at skiptask; ok þykir svá qlum, þótt ek kveða upp.'*⁶⁶⁷

(Now the men from Sýrdolir sit to drink [at the Haukdalr booth] while the other men were at the court because there were lawsuit sessions. Then a very noisy man, called Arnórr, comes into their booth and said: 'There is a very great issue about you Haukdalr people, that you pay no heed to any other thing than drinking; and that you do not want to come to the court where your þingmen are dealing with important matters; and everyone thinks so though (only) I say it out loud.)

Of course the men cannot endure such harsh comments and having their reputation at stake, so they go to the court in order to offer their support only to find that it is not

⁶⁶⁴ *Nj* CXIX, p. 297.

⁶⁶⁵ Sitting places and their social relevance will be studied in the last section of this chapter.

⁶⁶⁶ *Nj* CXIX and CXX.

⁶⁶⁷ *Gisl* VI, p. 20.

needed at all. The saga seems to imply that after finding themselves without any business at the *þing* they go back to the booth (presumably to drink again) since soon after another man comes to find them at their booth to bring them new gossip.

There are only three instances in which drinking at the *þing* is explicitly mentioned in the *Sturlunga saga* compilation. In these three occasions in which people drink at the *þing* one can notice that by the Age of the Sturlungs, when the *Þing* and *Alþingi* were long established institutions, there had been some changes in the drinking places at the assemblies. As we will see later in this section, it seems that at least by the late twelfth century merchants such as Qlkofri had expanded their businesses and established drinking booths (*qibúð*) at the *þing* locations. This does not mean that drinking at the *goðar*'s booths stopped taking place, but it means that a new kind of gathering space appeared at some point in the development of the assembly sites. The first of these drinking scenes takes place in 1181, when Páll Sǫlvason, *goði* of Reykholt, is attending the *þing*. *Sturlu saga* mentions that, on the way to his booth, Páll runs into Jón Loftsson, and he invites Páll to join him at his booth: “Páll bað han hafa þökk fyrir boðit, - ‘en ek mun ríða til búðar minnar, en vér munum drekka allir samt um þingit.’ Ok svá gerðu þeir.”⁶⁶⁸ (Páll thanked him for the offer, - ‘but I shall ride to my booth, and we shall drink together at the *þing*.’ And so they did.) From the answer we can gather that Jón was actually inviting Páll to drink at his booth, but it is not clear if that ‘drinking together at the *þing*’ would actually take place at an establishment where people could gather to drink or if it was supposed to take place in the open, at the assembly site, as people seem to have engaged in drinking while the assemblies took place. In any case, by the year 1231 we get an explicit mention of a drinking-establishment at the assembly site. That year during the *þing* “*Gekk Sturla þá til búðar Snorra, ok var hann kominn í hvílu, er Sturla klappaði þar at durum. Kallaði Sturla*

⁶⁶⁸ *Sturl XXXIII*, p. 112.

Snorra í ölbúð ok sagði honum þar vígit".⁶⁶⁹ (Then Sturla went to Snorri's booth, but he had gone to bed when Sturla knocked at the door. Sturla called Snorri to the *qlbúð* [*ql*-booth] and there told him about the killing.) Maybe by the early thirteenth century this kind of establishment had become more common at the assembly sites. All that we can know for sure is that there was a transition in the places where people gathered to drink during the assembly. The third and last reference to drinking at the *þing* in the *Sturlunga saga* compilation is of a dubious nature. The same *Sturlu saga* mentions, just after the scene in which Páll Sǫlvason and Jón Loftsson agree to drink at the *þing* that "*Sturla var oftast í búð sinni ok gekk óviða ok lét skemmta sér heima í búð*"⁶⁷⁰ (Sturla was often in his booth and rarely went out and had his entertainment in his booth.) The context of the saga makes this seem as a rather isolated case; maybe already by 1181 it was more common for men to go looking for entertainment at the *qlbúð*, where they could meet more people, than to stay at their own booth.

Drinking at the *þing* seems to have become a problem by the end of the thirteenth century. The Icelandic law-code *Jónsbók*, composed during the last quarter of the thirteenth century, attempts to regulate this problem by prohibiting alcohol intake at the *lqgrétta*.⁶⁷¹ The law states that "*Drykk skal engi til lqgréttu bera, hvárki til sǫlu né annan veg; en ef borinn verður, þá er upptækr, ok eigu þingmenn þat*."⁶⁷² (Drink shall not be taken to the *lqgrétta*, neither to sell nor in any other way; and if it is taken [to the *lqgrétta*] then it is confiscated and the members of the assembly will keep it.) Furthermore, the same law states that "*en ef nokkur slæz í mat eða mungát ok rækir þat meirr en þingit, hann skal enga uppreist eiga sins máls á þeim degi*."⁶⁷³ (if someone engages himself with food or *mungát* and pays more heed to that than to the *þing*, he shall not raise his speech [case] to anyone during that day.) These two fragments of the

⁶⁶⁹ *Ísl* LXXX, p. 80.

⁶⁷⁰ *Sturl* XXXIII, p. 112.

⁶⁷¹ The *lqgrétta* was the place where the assembly took place.

⁶⁷² *Jb*, p. 8-9.

⁶⁷³ *Jb*, p. 8.

same law seem to be contradictory, as the law did not allow any drinks to be carried to the *lqgrétta*⁶⁷⁴ and at the same time it stipulates what is to be done if someone pays more heed to his drinking than to the assembly. In any case, what we can gather from this evidence is that people did actually consume alcoholic beverages during the assembly meetings. This might have led to some trouble, perhaps due to drunken speeches or drunken behaviour during the meetings, so that alcohol-consumption was banned at the assembly site. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that this law also bans the sale of alcoholic beverages at the *þing*, for this law is almost contemporary with *Qlkofra þátttr*, which is believed to be composed during the late thirteenth century. Perhaps the *þátttr* is actually narrating events that took place during the time of its composition instead of events that took place soon after the settlement of Iceland.

4.3.2- DRINKING AT A BATTLE-PLACE

Maybe one of the most common images of the popular perception of the Viking Age is that of a group of drunken Norsemen or berserks raiding a village. However, this image is not very common in the literary sources, as there are only a few instances in which alcohol is said to be consumed before or after a battle. As is to be expected, the battlefield as a drinking place is to be found mainly in the *Fornaldar sqgur* rather than in the other saga genres, as it is precisely this group of fantastic sagas that deals mainly with legendary Viking raids. Thus, the evidence that we are about to examine may belong more to a romanticized vision of the Viking Age than a historic portrayal of drinking while looting.

As we have seen in previous chapters, alcohol was an expensive commodity, a fact which could well have turned it into a commodity worth raiding for. This point of view seems to be supported by *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* where, during an attack in Gotland the Swedish king orders his people to evacuate the town leaving all their food,

⁶⁷⁴ “The *lqgrétta* was the public court of law held during the general assembly.” (*JED, lqgrétta*)

drink and jewellery on display. The reaction on the part of the attacking army is to believe that

*Konungr þessi hefir verit hjartaragr, er hann hefir hlaupit hér frá svá mikilli sælu dýrra gripa ok þar með búit sínum óvinum vist ok drykk. Erum vér mjök fallnir í fullsælu eftir vart erfiði. Skulum vér hér fyrst drekka ok snæða, en síðan skal skipta vóru herfangi.*⁶⁷⁵

(This king has been feeble-hearted, and he has run away from so many precious things and left food and drink for his enemies. We have been greatly rewarded for all our troubles. We shall first drink and eat here, and then divide our loot.)

The saga states that the idea of leaving so many luxuries at hand was of course a defensive trick, for the king knows that the invading army will be tempted by all the luxuries he left behind, so that they would cease to pursue him in order to indulge with food and drink. Thus, at least in the mentality of the late thirteenth century that gave birth to this saga, the goods that were most sought during the Viking raids were not only material riches but also food and, moreover, alcoholic drinks, which were quite expensive in the Norse homelands.

It is probable that after having taken control over a village the raiders seized as many valuables as possible, alcoholic beverages included. So, in several instances the *Fornaldar sqgur* portray the troops drinking and feasting after a battle. Unless the attackers carried their own provisions and barrels full of alcohol to combat (which seems rather unlikely due to the weight of liquids) all the goods they required for their feasting should have been seized at the place of the battle. Accordingly, in *Yngvars saga víðfórla* we are told that after the army takes control over the city of Heliopolis “*Þar tóku þeir margs konar gersamar ok mikinn fjárhlut ok báru til skipa.*”⁶⁷⁶ (There they took jewelry of many kinds and many valuables and carried them to the ships.) Afterwards Yngvarr’s army most probably committed to drinking the wine they found in the locality, as the saga reports that the next morning “*þá snerist fagnaðr silfrs ok*

⁶⁷⁵ *HG XIII*, p. 94.

⁶⁷⁶ *YngV VII*, p. 445.

gleði víns í mikinn harm”⁶⁷⁷ (then all the joy of the silver and the pleasure of wine turned into great sorrow.) Similarly, in *Eymundar þáttur Hringssonar* we are told that after a battle day “*menn sváfu fast í öllum tjöldum, er þeir váru farmóðir ok mjök drukknir*”⁶⁷⁸ (all the men in all the tents were fast asleep, they were exhausted by the journey and very drunk.) Once more, all the provisions must have come from the cellars of the villagers. In the same way, in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, after having seized Novgorod and stripped the dead of their valuables, we are told that King Eiríkr “*gekk í borgina með sínu föruneyti, ok höfðu alls kyns gleði með drykk ok hljóðfærum.*”⁶⁷⁹ (the king went into the city with his followers and had all kinds of merriment with drinks and musical instruments.) Once more, the depiction of a *fornaldar* saga raid involves securing the invaded town’s alcohol supplies and celebrating while depleting them.⁶⁸⁰

It seems quite reasonable to believe that, at least in the mentality of the saga composers, Viking raids involved the seizing of alcoholic beverages. This might have been a way of collecting provisions for the rest of the journey or a way of treating the self after a battle. But considering the prices of drinks in Medieval Scandinavia, alcohol, just as jewelry, was a commodity worth fighting for and, if possible, worth taking back home as the product of the expedition. The beverages seized during the raids could then be either drunk in situ or taken back home and used to gain power through the strengthening of friendship bonds through feasts.⁶⁸¹

Drinking after battle seems to have been a way of rewarding the self. But perhaps drinking before combat could have been considered as a quite heroic attitude or a way of strengthening the bonds between friends before the fight. Maybe this was a way in which the leader and his followers were to feast for the last time all together. Drinking as a group was a way of strengthening friendship and pledging allegiance to

⁶⁷⁷ *YngV* VII, p. 445-46.

⁶⁷⁸ *Eym* CIII, p. 212.

⁶⁷⁹ *GHR* III, p. 170.

⁶⁸⁰ Further scenes of drinking after a battle can be found in *GHR* XXX, p. 246 and *HG* XXXII, p. 163.

⁶⁸¹ Gift-giving culture connected with alcohol will be studied in chapter 6.

one's leader.⁶⁸² Thus, drinking before going to war could also have been a way of reaffirming the bonds of the army to its lord as well as a way of reaffirming the friendship and loyalty between warriors before confronting death. This attitude can be perceived in *Hrólfs saga kraka*. In this saga, before going to fight his last battle (in which he and all his warriors die) King Hrólfr kraki sits to drink with all his retinue: “*Hrólfr konungr sprettr nú ór hásetinu, er hann hafði áðr drukkit um hrið ok allir hans kappar, skilja nú við drukkin góða at sinni ok eru úti því næst.*”⁶⁸³ (King Hrólfr leaps now from the high-seat after having drunk for a while, and all his champions did the same, they left the good drink and went out [to fight].) The saga portrays black magic and not drunkenness as the ultimate reason for King Hrólfr's death so, the act of drinking before battle is not portrayed as an unreasonable thing to do. It is also quite significant that after having engaged in so many battles it is only this last one in which the king is portrayed as sitting to drink with his retinue. It might have well been the king's custom to drink before combat, but the fact that the author decided to present this final battle in such a fashion might be intended to present the heroic attitude of this war-band, remaining calm before confronting death.

The manner in which the *Íslendinga sǫgur* depict feasting while on a raiding expedition or after a battle is similar to the portrayal of comparable events found in the *Fornaldar sǫgur*. For example, in *Brennu-Njáls saga* we are told that after a battle in Scotland “*Jarl gerði þá veizlu mikla, ok at þeiri veizlu gaf jarl Kára sverð gott ok spjót gullrekit, en Helga gullhring ok skikkju.*”⁶⁸⁴ (The earl held a great feast, and at that feast the earl gave Kári a good sword and a gold-inlaid spear, and to Helgi a gold ring and a cloak.) Perhaps the main difference is that here the feast is held by the earl in order to express his gratitude to his followers, while the drinking scenes after battles depicted in the *Fornaldar sǫgur* appear as a logical consequence of distributing the battle-spoils.

⁶⁸² This will be discussed in Chapter 6.

⁶⁸³ *Hrólfr L*, p. 98.

⁶⁸⁴ *Nj LXXXVI*, p. 207-208.

Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls, probably composed sometime at the beginning of the fifteenth century, provides what, to my knowledge, is the only scene of drinking while on a Viking raid to be found in the *Íslendinga sǫgur*. The saga tells that, at some point during the late tenth century, Gunnarr spends a summer raiding and “*Varð þeim gott til fjár og frægðar. Einn dag sigldu þeir að eyjum nökkurum. Þeir lögðu að landi og tjölduðu á landi og sofa af nóttina. Þeir sofnuðu skjótt, er menn voru drukkniir og móðir.*”⁶⁸⁵ (They gained much wealth and renown. One day they sailed to some islands. They made the land and pitched their tents and slept through the night. They quickly fell asleep because the men were drunk and weary.) As the text states that they had been raiding for a long while, one can then suppose that they got drunk with alcoholic beverages that were the product of plundering. Thus, at least this saga supports the *Fornaldar sǫgur* perception that, during raids, people looted for alcoholic beverages as well as for material goods.

In general, we have seen that apart from drinking at *hallar* and *skytningar* the saga corpus also presents other less frequent drinking scenarios. These are basically assemblies and battles. When it comes to drinking at the assemblies, the evidence we have from contemporary sources seems to prove that this is a historic fact. Alcohol consumption at the *þing* evolved mainly from drinking in one’s booth -when the *þing* was still a young institution- to a more public form of drinking at *qlbúðar* (*ql*-booths) due to the later arrival of professional brewers to the site. People could also drink during the assemblies, but this seems to have been a source of trouble, so that alcohol consumption during the meetings was banned. But this last point seems to be debatable, as our only source for this is contradictory.

The *Fornaldar sǫgur* present several drinking scenes before and after battles take place. However, the nature of these sources does not let us arrive at any

⁶⁸⁵ *GunnK* VII, p. 368-69.

conclusions about the historicity of this fact. It seems logical to assume that alcohol was sought for as a product of raids and as a spoil of battle because, after all, it was just like gold and jewelry, a rather expensive commodity in the North. However, the way in which the sources portray such scenes make me believe that alcohol-consumption scenes in these circumstances are more the product of a romanticized vision of the Viking age than an actual historical fact. Evidence in other kinds of sources such as the law corpus, the *Sturlunga saga* compilation, or the *Íslendinga sǫgur* is either scant or too absent as to draw any conclusions.

4.4 – SEATING ARRANGEMENTS IN THE HALL AS A SYMBOL OF POWER

On his way back home from consulting a dream interpreter Guðmundr Eyjólfsson has to spend the night at the farm in Tjórness, where he is welcomed and assigned a place to sit in the hall.

Ok var honum skipat í qndvegi, en innar frá honum var skipat Ófeigi Járngerðarsyni. Ok er borðin komu fram, þá setti Ófeigr hnefann á borðit ok mælti: "Hversu mikill þykir þér hnefi sjá, Guðmundr? Hann mælti: "Vist mikill." Ófeigr mælti: "Þat muntu ætla, at afl muni í vera?" Guðmundr mælti: "Ek ætla þat vist." Ófeigr segir: "Mikit muntu ætla, at hqgg verði af?" Guðmundr segir: "Stórum mikit." Ófeigr segir: "Þat muntu ætla, at saka muni?" Guðmundr mælti: "Beinbrot eða bani." Ófeigr svarar: "Hversu myndi þér sá dauðdagi þykja?" Guðmundr mælti: "Stórrillr, ok eigi mynda ek vilja þann fá." Ófeigr mælti: "Sittu þá eigi í rúmi mínu." Guðmundr segir: "Þat skal ok vera," ok settisk qðrum megin. Það fannsk á, at Ófeigr vildi þar mest vera metinn, en skipaði áðr qndvegiti.⁶⁸⁶

(And he was placed on the 'high-seat'⁶⁸⁷ and Ófeigr Járngerðarson was placed further in, in front of him. And when the tables were set, then Ófeigr put his fist on the table and said: 'How big does this fist seem to you, Guðmundr?' He said: 'Very big.' Ófeigr said: 'Do you think that there is any strength in it?' Guðmundr said: 'I think there is.' Ófeigr says: 'Do you think that a great blow can come from it?' Guðmundr says: 'A very great one.' Ófeigr says: 'Do you think it can do any harm?' Guðmundr said: 'Broken bones or death.' Ófeigr answers: 'How

⁶⁸⁶ *Ljósv XI(XXI)*, p. 58-59.

⁶⁸⁷ The original reads 'qndvegi', which in an Icelandic context is very similar to the 'high-seat'. For the sake of clarity, at the moment I will translate 'qndvegi' as 'high-seat' and not as 'opposing-seat'. These concepts will be dealt with in detail later in this section.

would you like to receive your death from it?' Guðmundr said: 'Very badly, and I would not like to get that.' Ófeigr said: 'Then don't sit in my place.' Guðmundr said: 'That shall be done,' and sat in another place. It could be perceived that Ófeigr wanted to be reckoned as the greatest one in there, as he had always occupied the high-seat.)

This passage illustrates the conflicts that commonly arose in relation to the seating arrangements made for the guests in the halls. As we will see in the following pages, the seating order in the hall followed a rigorous arrangement, that categorized and classified and organized the community in the hall according to the place that each of its members held in society. The hall was a microcosm in which the community was symbolically placed representing the social structure. Among the criteria for the seating order, social status, gender and age seem to have been most common. In this section I will analyze the role of seating arrangements in the hall in connection with power display and recognition. For this purpose, I will approach the topic following the sequence of events with which seating was organized. That is, I will start by studying the guests' arrival and recognition in the hall, as knowing the status of a guest was essential to provide him a seat in accordance to his rank. I will then proceed to study the different types seating allocation available as well as their social significance. Finally, I will analyze the different situations that arose in connection with seating in a hall.

The host of a feast had to carefully plan the seating arrangement of his guests in order to maintain social structure and, maybe more importantly, to avoid offending his guests by assigning them a place that was not in accordance with their status. As seen in the example provided above, these difficulties increased when there was an unexpected guest in the hall, especially if the newcomer was a stranger, as sometimes the seating order had to be rearranged. If the newcomer was someone the host was acquainted with, he was simply assigned a sitting place. But if he was a stranger, then the host's first task was to identify the newcomer by asking his name and family in order to know his status and, perhaps, his prowess or faults. Then, once the status of the newcomer was established (if at all), the second task was to provide the guest with a seat according to

his social rank. As seen in the example from *Ljósvetninga saga*, the position accorded to the newcomer could sometimes cause some perturbation among other people at the hall, who might have felt jealous if the person who had just arrived was assigned a place of more importance than the one they held.

Sitting in the appropriate place at public gatherings seems to have had special importance in the worldview of the Norse. Considering that feasts and social meetings did not happen very often, they were one of the few occasions on which people had a chance to show-off their wealth and status and, through that, to re-assert their rank and both display and find out where they stood in the power-pyramid.

Taking this into consideration, it is not surprising (and perhaps even symbolic) that the opening lines of the lore known as *Hávamál* give advice about expected behaviour when entering a hall:

*Gáttir allar áðr gangi fram,
um scoðaz scyli,
um scygnaz scyli;
þvíat óvíst er at vita hvar óvinir
sitja á fleti fyrir.⁶⁸⁸*

(All the doorways, before you walk forward, / one should look at, / one should spy, / because it is not known for certain where enemies / sit ahead in the house.)

And once the guest enters the hall he speaks the following words:

*Gefendr heilir! gestr er inn kominn,
hvar scal sitja síá?
mioc er bráðr, sá er á brqndom scal
sins um freista frama.⁶⁸⁹*

(Blessed be the giver! A guest has come arrived, / where shall he sit? / Great is his haste, the one who by the fire is going to be tested out.)

In Old Norse literature there is a plethora of examples that follow the model of these two stanzas. Both the size and weather of Iceland and Norway forced travellers make breaks during their journey and ask friends and strangers for hospitality. And it seems to

⁶⁸⁸ *Háv* 1. This stanza is also found in the beginning of Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*, when Gylfi enters the hall of the gods. See *Gylf* 2.

⁶⁸⁹ *Háv* 2.

have been customary to offer hospitality to almost every person who asked for it, be it a friend or an enemy. Some extreme examples of the duty to offer hospitality can be found in *Vápnfirðinga saga*, *Njáls saga* and *Valla-Ljóts saga*. For example, *Vápnfirðinga saga* narrates how after a journey to summons Þorleifr inn kristni (Þorleifr the Christian) the weather conditions force Ketill to return to Þorleifr's farm and ask for lodging.⁶⁹⁰ In *Njáls saga* we hear about Flosi, who rides with one hundred men to the farm of a man he had murdered and asks for hospitality. There, in spite of the humiliation and hatred of his host, he and his men are provided with a meal.⁶⁹¹ Something similar happens in *Valla-Ljóts saga*, where we get to hear an explanation for this sort of forced hospitality. There Ljótr confronts Þorgrímr for hosting their enemies and asks “*Hví tóktu við óvinum várum, Þorgrímr frændi?*” *Hann svarar: ‘Þat eina samði mér.’*⁶⁹² (‘Why did you receive our enemies, kinsman Þorgrímr?’ He answered: ‘That was the only appropriate thing for me to do.’) In other words providing hospitality, even to one’s foes, was considered as an honourable conduct.

Returning to our *Hávamál* stanzas, they stress, apart from the duty of hospitality, the need to find an appropriate place to sit in the hall. As William I. Miller puts it: “More tense than the *mannjafnaðr* game was the feast itself where the ranking games were played, for the host had to seat his guests and the seating arrangement was its own man-comparing game.”⁶⁹³ On most occasions, the conventions of the seating order are kept implicit as “everyone generally had an idea of who belonged where.”⁶⁹⁴ However we find a few occasions on which these rules are verbalized. There seem to be three standards, which can be summarized through the next three brief examples. First, and

⁶⁹⁰ *Vápnf* V, p. 34-35. In the saga Þorleifr the Christian’s reaction when his summoners leave is: “*Hann bað þá apr hverfa, ef veðrit tæki at harðna*” (He invited them to return if the weather began to worsen” (*Vápnf* V, p. 34.) This, plus the fact that the narrator stresses the fact that Þorleifr is a Christian may be a way of comparing the ethos of heathen and Christian religions more than an actual reflection of reality.

⁶⁹¹ *Nj* CXXXVI, p. 359-62.

⁶⁹² *Vall* VII, p. 254.

⁶⁹³ Miller, William Ian, *An Eye for an Eye* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 175. *Mannjafnaðr* and other drinking games will be studied in chapter 6.

⁶⁹⁴ Miller, p. 176.

most common in any kind of gathering are the men's personal and social qualities. A clear example of this occurs during a feast at Fornastaðir, when the hosts are preparing to receive the guests: “‘Faðir,’ segir hann, ‘hvárt skal skipa mǫnnum at mannvirðingu eða eptir framgöngu?’”⁶⁹⁵ (‘Father’ says he, shall I arrange the seating of the men by honour/rank or according to bravery?”) This kind of seating arrangement could be only applied to men, though, as we will see later, women could also be placed according to their status. The second most common way of arranging the seating was by gender. This is made clear at a wedding feast in Rangárvellir, where “*Skipuðusk menn þar í sæti, en konur skipuðu pall, ok var brúðrin dǫpr heldr. Drekkja þeir veizluna, ok fer hon vel fram.*”⁶⁹⁶ (The men were arranged there on the seats [benches], and the women were arranged at the dais and the bride was downcast. They drank, and the feast went well.) According to the literary sources, a gendered distribution of guests was the most common arrangement at wedding feasts, as it is often stated that men and women sat in different locations during these gatherings. Finally, there is a third way of arranging the seating, which is not mentioned very often, this is by age, as is explicitly told in *Svarfdæla saga*. There, during a wedding at Grund “*Varð mǫnnum skipat í sæti á Grund; sátu allir inir ellri menn á annan bekk, en Þorsteinn svqrfuðr ok Karl, son hans, ok Klaufi, frændi þeira, á annan.*”⁶⁹⁷ (The men were arranged in their seats at Grund; all the older men sat at one bench, and Þorsteinn svqrfuðr and Karl, his son, and Klaufi their kinsman at another.) There are a few instances in which children are said to attend feasts⁶⁹⁸ and in the few that do mention their position in the hall they appear playing on the floor, as is the case of Hallgerðr Hqskuldsdóttir who during a feast “*lék sér á gólfinu við aðrar meyjar.*”⁶⁹⁹ (played on the floor with other girls.). It seems more plausible to find children playing on the floor during feasts than to find them engaged in drinking

⁶⁹⁵ *Ljósv* XV(XXV), p. 83.

⁶⁹⁶ *Nj* VI, p. 21-22.

⁶⁹⁷ *Svarfd* XIV, p. 165.

⁶⁹⁸ For example, see *Finnb* VI and *Vatn* VII.

⁶⁹⁹ *Nj* I, p. 6.

and socializing or doing politics at the benches. And cases like that of Egill Skallagrímsson, who at the age of three is forbidden from attending a feast because, as his father states, “*þú kannt ekki fyrir þér at vera í fjqlmenni, þar er drykkjur eru miklar, er þú þykkir ekki góðr viðskiptis, at þú sér ódrukkinn*”⁷⁰⁰ (you cannot behave properly as to be at a gathering where there is heavy drinking; you are not easy to deal with even when you are not drunk) seem more unlikely. This might be a particular trait of Egill’s or a literary invention to characterize Egill rather than a common occurrence for children at feasts.

There is yet another way of allocating places called *tvímennigr*, which is drinking in pairs with each couple sharing a drinking vessel. It seems that this custom designated a man and a woman as drinking partners during a feast. For example, at a feast in *Egils saga* we are told that:

*Þar var hlutaðr tvímennigr á qptnum, sem síðvenja var til. En þar at gildinu var sá maðr, er Hqgni hét; hann átti bú í Leku; hann var maðr stórauðigr, allra manna friðastr sýnum, vitr maðr ok ættsmár, ok hafði hafisk af sjálfum sér. Hann átti dóttur allfriða, er nefnd er Hildiríðr; hon hlaut at sitja hjá Bjqrgólfi.*⁷⁰¹

(In the evening they cast lots to decide on the *tvímennigr*, as was the tradition. At the banquet there was a man called Hqgni, he lived at Leka, he was a wealthy man, he was the handsomest of men, a wise and he came fom an ordinary family and had achieved his position by his own means. He had a very attractive daughter who is called Hildiríðr, she was allotted to sit together with Bjqrgólfr.)

Similarly, in *Kormáks saga*, the *tvímennigr* consists of a man and a woman, as “*Kormákr sat útar við dyr í tjaldinu ok drakk tvímennigr á Steingerði.*”⁷⁰² (Kormákr sat on the outer side of the bench, near to the door in the tent and drank *tvímennigr* with Steingerðr.) Of course, when there were not enough women to pair every man with at the feast, two men were assigned to sit and shared the same horn. *Íslendinga saga* offers an example of this. The saga tells that “*sat þá Ísleifr Gizurarson innar frá Hrafni ok*

⁷⁰⁰ Eg XXXI, p. 81.

⁷⁰¹ Eg VII, p. 16.

⁷⁰² Korm XXV, p.295.

*drukku af einu silfrkeri ok minntust við jafnan um daginn, er hvárr drakk til annars.*⁷⁰³

(then Ísleifr Gizurarson sat next to Hrafn and both drank from the same silver goblet and, throughout the day, they saluted each other with a kiss while each toasted to the other.) More than a homoerotic scene, this last occurrence seems to be a parody of what actually happened when a man and a woman drank *tvímenningr*. After all the tradition seems to have been outdated by the thirteenth century since, when it is mentioned in *Egill's saga*, the narrator states that they did it '*sem siðvenja var til*' (as was the tradition). This might be an antiquarian touch on the part of the narrator, who may be trying to portray ancient Icelandic customs. *Tvímenningr* drinking between men and women also seems to be a literary motif since it often leads to a feud derived from the intimacy between drinkers.

The choice of seats available in a hall were the *hásæti*, *qndvegi*, *pallr*, *bekkr*, and, of course, the floor (*gólf*). The most prestigious of these was the *hásæti* (high-seat), which is a compound of the words *hár* (high) and *sæti* (seat), the person sitting on it was called the *hásætismaðr* (high-seat man). It was normally placed in the middle of the bench, and the prestige of the other seats in the hall was set according to their distance from and position relative to it. The *hásæti*, as *IED* puts it, was associated with the nobility, i.e. kings and earls.⁷⁰⁴ Accordingly of the 24 times in which the *hásæti* is mentioned in the *Íslendinga sǫgur*,⁷⁰⁵ in 8 instances it is associated with a king⁷⁰⁶; in 2 cases it is associated with a queen;⁷⁰⁷ and in 3 cases it is an earl who occupies it.⁷⁰⁸ However, it seems that it was not only associated with nobility, but with wealth and power in general, as in 11 instances we also find the *hásæti* in Icelandic locations, in

⁷⁰³ *Ísl* CLXX, p. 483.

⁷⁰⁴ *IED*, *hár*.

⁷⁰⁵ *OrðT* returns 24 entries for the term *hásæti*, namely, those discussed below. See *OrðT*, *hásæti*.

⁷⁰⁶ *Eg* XI, LV (bis), *Nj* CLIV, *Bárð* XVIII (bis), *Jqkul* III, *Vigl* IV, VI and, *Flóam* XII.

⁷⁰⁷ *Nj* III (bis).

⁷⁰⁸ *Flj* IV, XIV and *Vigl* IV.

these cases occupied by *goðar* or by rich farmers [*mestr bóndi*].⁷⁰⁹ For a contemporary audience, the location of the high-seat was most probably well known, and so we can find only a few references stating its place within the hall. *Brennu-Njáls saga*, for example, tells us that at the hall of Guðmundr inn ríki, a powerful Icelandic chieftain “*hásæti var í miðri búðinni, ok sat þar Guðmundr.*”⁷¹⁰ (the high-seat was in the middle of the room, and Guðmundr sat there.) This remark on the location of the high-seat might be due to the fact that it was oddly placed, making it noteworthy, as one would expect for the *hásæti* to be located in a place where the guests could see their leader but also in a position in which the leader would be able to see all of his men. Thus, being located in the centre of the room, the *hásætismaðr*⁷¹¹ could not be aware of that what happened at his back. Another chapter of the saga locates the *hásæti* at the dais, from where the leader could keep an eye on all the attendants: “*settu hann á pall í hásæti*”⁷¹² (placed him at the high-seat, on the dais), which makes it a more strategic location.

The *qndvegi* (also spelled *qndugi*) was the next most honourable place to sit within a hall. This is a compound word formed by the elements *and* (opposite) and *vegr* (way), meaning ‘the opposite seat’ (to the high-seat). *IEW* translates it as “*hochsitz*”⁷¹³ (high-seat) and relates it to the root *and-*, meaning “*entgegen*” (towards), equivalent to the Gothic *anda-* and the Latin *ante*, meaning “*gegenuber*” (opposite),⁷¹⁴ which confirms the etymologies provided by *IEW*. The man who sat at it was called *qndvegismaðr* (also spelled *qndugismaðr*), that is, the next person in rank or esteem from the *hásætismaðr*. That means that the two seats of highest honour were facing each other. And here we find a difference between the Icelandic and the Norwegian traditions. As in Iceland there was no nobility and, as the *hásæti* was mostly reserved

⁷⁰⁹ These occur in *Eb* XXXIII, *Nj* CXVI (bis), CXVIII, CXIX, CXLVII, CLIX and, *Eir* IV.

⁷¹⁰ *Nj* CXIX, p. 301.

⁷¹¹ The term *hásætismaðr* occurs only one in the *Islendinga sǫgur*, in *Kjaln* XIV. See *OrðT*, *hásætismaður*.

⁷¹² *Nj* CXLVII, p. 421.

⁷¹³ *IEW*, *qndvegi*.

⁷¹⁴ *IEW*, *and-*.

for royalty, then *qndvegi* was the name of the seat of highest honour in Iceland. On the other hand, in Norway *qndvegi* was the name of the second highest place of honour, though sometimes the term is used to designate both of these opposing places. The *qndvegi* was reserved for the king's or earl's most esteemed men or for his high-status visitors. For example, in *Egils saga* we read that: "*af qllum hirðmönnum virði konungur mest skáld sín; þeir skipuðu annat qndvegi.*"⁷¹⁵ (of all his retinue, the king held his poets in highest regard, they occupied the other *qndvegi*.) The *qndvegi* is often mentioned in connection with halls in Iceland and it is the place at which the *goðar* are said to be sitting at meetings and feasts. The seat seems to have been decorated by a pair of wooden posts or pillars, called *qndvegissúlur* (*qndvegi* posts), about which little is known⁷¹⁶ but they still play an important role in Icelandic history. According to *Landnámabók* Ingólfr Arnarson, the first settler of Iceland took his *qndvegi*-pillars with him when he migrated to Iceland. When he sighted land "*skaut hann fyrir borð qndugissúlum sínum til heilla; hann mælti svá fyrir, at hann skyldi þar byggja, er súlurnar kæmi í land*"⁷¹⁷ (he threw overboard his *qndvegi*-pillars for good luck; he then said that he should settle there where the high-seat pillars landed.) This action inspired a full generation of settlers who also cast their *qndvegi*-pillars overboard and settled at the place in which they came ashore.⁷¹⁸ Or maybe this act only inspired several saga-composers, providing them with a poetic motif to embellish the stories of the first generation of settlers. It is also interesting to note that the *qndvegi* (or opposing seat) had meaning only in connection with the high-seat, which it opposed. Nevertheless, once the concept was taken to Iceland it kept its name, even if there were no high-seat to

⁷¹⁵ *Eg* VIII, p. 19.

⁷¹⁶ For further reading on *qndvegi*-posts see Hörður Ágústsson, '*Öndvegissúlur í Eyjafirði*', *Árbók hins Íslenska Fornleifafélags*, (1975), 105-28.

⁷¹⁷ *Ldn* VIII, p. 42.

⁷¹⁸ For example, see *Eb* III, *Ldn* (S) CLXXIX (this occurrence is also mentioned in *Vatn* XII and XV), *Korm* II and *Laxd* III and V. *Eg* XXVII narrates that a coffin was used in a similar fashion.

oppose it. The *qndvegi* changed its meaning, from being the ‘seat opposing the high-seat’ to being the ‘seat opposing the other opposing seat’.

The rest of the attendants sat at the *bekkr* or *pallr*. The term *bekkr* can be translated as ‘bank’⁷¹⁹ (bench), “especially of the long benches in an old hall used instead of chairs”⁷²⁰ and depending on its position it could be an *æðri bekk* (higher-bench) or an *óæðri bekk* (not-higher-bench or lower bench). The first of this was the most prestigious of both benches. The etymology of the term *pallr*, according to *IED*, is uncertain, but the word is believed to be of Norman origin.⁷²¹ *AEW*, translates it as “bank, bühne”⁷²² (bench, stage) and relates it to the Germanic root **plaza*, while *IEW* says that “wahrscheinlich altes lehnwort aus dem slav.: aslav. polu ‘seite, diele, bank”⁷²³ (probably old loanword from Slavic :Old-Slavic *polu* ‘side, floorboard, bench). In the literary sources this word is used as a synonym of *bekkr*, though it most probably refers to the dais or higher-bench. As mentioned earlier on, the prestige associated with each of the places in the bench was set according to their distance from and position relative to the *hásæti* and/or the *qndvegi*. The closest the seat is to the high-seat the more prestige is associated with it. This can be perceived in *Þorsteins þáttr uxafóts* during a royal feast in Norway. At this feast “var Ívarr ljómi þá með konungi í svá mikilli virðingu, at tveir menn sátu þá upp í milli þeira konungs.”⁷²⁴ (Ívarr the Radiant was there with the king in such high honour, that only two men sat between him and the king.) Similarly, in *Jökuls þáttr Búasonar* we are told that during a feast “settist konungr í hásæti og á aðra hönd honum Jökull, en son hans á aðra”⁷²⁵ (the king sat on the high-seat and Jökull [sat] on one side of him and his son on the other.) That is, the

⁷¹⁹ *AEW*, *bekkr* and *IEW*, *bekkr*.

⁷²⁰ *IED*, *bekkr*.

⁷²¹ *IED*, *pallr*.

⁷²² *AEW*, *pallr*.

⁷²³ *IED*, *pallr*.

⁷²⁴ *ÞUxaf XIII*, p. 365.

⁷²⁵ *Jqkul III*, p. 58.

prince, or the second person in importance at the feast, sits next to the king (or *goði*).⁷²⁶ The bench on the king's (or *goði*'s) side, called *æðri bekk*, was the one that enjoyed the highest esteem; second to it in importance was the bench facing the king's or *goði*'s bench, called *óæðri bekk*. When it comes to an Icelandic context where, as we have seen, there were no high-seats but just a pair of opposing seats, the difference between that *qndvegi* located on the high-bench and that located on the lower bench was often made explicit. Thus, we hear that “*maðr sat í öndugi á inum æðra bekk*”⁷²⁷ (a man sat on the opposing seat on the higher bench) in contrast with “*þér mun skipat á inn óæðra bekk gegnt qndugi Hrúts*”⁷²⁸ (you will be seated on the lower bench, next to Hrútr's opposing seat). This was just a way of clarifying who actually occupied the most honourable of the opposing seats.

There are just a few instances in which the social importance of the lower bench is explicitly stated, as on most occasions it can be perceived from the internal politics of the saga. However, *Fjótsdæla saga* provides an explicit, though not complete, list of the people expected to occupy the lower bench. In it, Þorvaldr is ordered to “*sittu á óæðra bekk þar sem mætast þrælar og frjálsir menn*.”⁷²⁹ (sit on the lower bench, there where the thralls and the free men gather.) This does not necessarily mean that only slaves and free men sat on the lower bench; Þorvaldr is actually being assigned a seat on the lower bench and among those who are more distant from the high-seat. As we have seen, an *qndvegi* was also located on the lower bench, but its proximity to the *qndvegi* on the higher bench or to the *hásæti* raised its status as compared to those seats on the same side of the table but that were more distant from it.

Since each position at the bench had a social status linked to it depending on its relative position from the high-seat or opposing seat on the higher bench, seat allotment

⁷²⁶ The fact that the prince sits next to the king and not on the seat opposing the high-seat may be due to the fact that there was none in the room, as will be discussed later in this section.

⁷²⁷ *Kjaln* XIV, p. 31.

⁷²⁸ *Nj* XXII, p. 60.

⁷²⁹ *Flj* V, p. 223.

could sometimes prove chaotic. It had to be planned extremely well. Accordingly, the seating order in the hall can sometimes be described in rigorous detail, as it is quite meaningful for the development of the story, while at the same time it provides information about the characters and their place in society. This can be well represented during a feast in *Njáls saga*. This saga reports that:

Gunnar hafði marga fyrirboðsmenn, ok skipaði hann svá sínum mǫnnum: Hann sat á miðjan bekk, en innar frá Þráinn Sigfússon, þá Úlfr aurgoði, þá Valgarðr hinn grái, þá Mqrðr ok Runólfr, þá Sigfússynir; Lambi sat innstr. It næsta Gunnari útar frá sat Njáll, þá Skarphéðinn, þá Helgi, þá Grímr, þá Hqskuldr, þá Hafr inn spaki, þá Ingjaldr frá Keldum, þá synir Þóris austan úr Holti. Þórir vildi sitja yztr virðingamanna, því at þá þótti hverjum gott þar, sem sat. Hqskuldr sat á miðjan bekk en synir hans innar frá honum; Hrútr sat útar frá Hqskuldi. En þá er eigi frá sagt, hversu Qðrum var skipat. Brúðr sat á miðjum palli, en til annarrar handar henni Þorgerðr, dóttir hennar, en til annarrar hendar Þórhalla, dóttir Ásgríms Elliða-Grimssonar. Þórhildr gengr um beina, ok báru þær Bergþóra mat á borð.⁷³⁰

(Gunnarr had many guests and he allocated seats to his men in the following fashion: He sat at the centre of the bench [*bekkr*] and next to him, towards the inside, sat Þráinn Sigfússon, then sat Úlfr aurgoði, then sat Valgarðr the Grey, then sat Mqrðr and Runólfr, then the Sigfússons, but Lambi was further in. Next to Gunnarr, towards the outside sat Njáll, then sat Skarphéðinn, then Helgi, then Grímr, then Hqskuldr, then Hafr the Gentle, then sat Ingjaldr from Keldr, then the sons of Þórir from Holt in the east. Þórir wanted to sit on the outermost of the places allocated to the honourable men, because then everyone would consider themselves well seated. Hqskuldr sat at the centre of the [other] bench [*bekkr*] and his sons next to him towards the inside; Hrútr sat next to Hqskuldr towards the outside. And there is nothing said about how the others were seated. The bride sat at the centre of the dais and on one side of her sat Þorgerðr, her daughter, and on her other side sat Þórhalla, the daughter of Ásgrímr Elliða-Grimsson. Þórhildr attended the guests and Bergþóra carried food to the table.)

But a few moments later Þráinn Sigfússon falls in love at first sight with Þorgerðr Þorsteinsdóttir and declares himself divorced from Þórhalla, and soon after, at the same feast, he marries Þorgerðr. Due to the change of status of Þórhalla and Þorgerðr the seating arrangements must be changed so that “*Þá var skipat konum í annat sinn; sat þá Þórhalla meðal brúða. Ferr nú boðið vel fram.*”⁷³¹ (then the women were seated in a different way; so Þórhalla sat between the brides. Now the wedding feast went on well.)

⁷³⁰ *Nj XXXIV*, pp. 88-89.

⁷³¹ *Nj XXXIV*, p. 90.

In general, seating places had to be carefully assigned, so that the guests would be well pleased with the justice with which they were located within the hall, and the attendants felt that everyone was honoured according to his/her rank. If a guest felt that he was assigned a seat that did not correspond to his honour, the whole feast could end in drama. A good example of this is that of Ófeigr, in *Ljósvetninga saga*,⁷³² who felt that he was seated below his rank. But seating someone above his rank could also be interpreted as an act of mockery and be perceived as an offence. For example, in *Njáls saga* “Flosi gekk inn í stofuna ok settisk niðr ok kastaði í pallinn há sætinu undan sér ok mælti: “Hvarki em ek konungur né jarl, ok þarf ekki at gera há sæti undir mér, ok þarf ekki at spotta mik.”⁷³³ (Flosi went into the room and sat down and threw over the bench the high-seat that was under him and said ‘I’m not a king or an earl, and there is no need to place a high-seat under me, and there is no need to make fun of me.’) Hildigunnr, his hostess, excuses herself for that and says that she meant no harm by this action and her apology is accepted.⁷³⁴ Men had to be allocated to a place which honoured them accurately according to their rank and deeds, otherwise they could feel insulted if they felt that the place was inappropriate for them. This rule also applied to women. The most famous seating dispute in Old Norse literature, leading directly to the greatest and most famous feud in Iceland, starts when Hallgerðr is displaced from her seat at the *pallr* so that another woman can take it. The conflict begins when “*gekk Bergþóra at pallinum ok Þórhalla með henni, ok mælti Bergþóra til Hallgerðar: ‘Þú skalt þoka fyrir konu þessi.’ Hallgerðr mælti: ‘Hvergi mun ek þoka, því at engi hornkerling vil ek vera.’*”

⁷³² Provided at the beginning of this section.

⁷³³ *Nj* CXVI, p. 290.

⁷³⁴ The conception of honour and mockery in this passage bears some resemblance to Snorri’s statement in his Prologue to *Heimskringla*, where he states that: ‘*er háttr skálda at lofa þann mest, er þá eru þeir fyrir, en engi myndi þat þora at segja sjálfum honum þau verk hans, er allir þeir, er heyrði, vissi, at hégómi væri ok skrqk, ok svá sjálfir hann. Þat væri þá hað, en eigi lof.*’ (it is the habit of poets to praise the most those in whose presence they are, and none would have dared to say in front of him about deeds which all those who listen, as well as he [the praised man] himself, knew to be falsehoods and lies. That would be mocking and not praising.) (*HkrProl*, p. 5)

'Ek skal hér ráða,' sagði Bergþóra."⁷³⁵ (Bergþóra went to the *pallr*, and Þórhalla went with her, and Bergþóra said to Hallgerðr: 'You must move aside for this woman.' Hallgerðr said: 'Not at all shall I move, since I do not want to become the old woman sitting in the corner [i.e. the one hat is pushed about from one corner to another].' 'I shall decide things here' said Bergþóra.) Hallgerðr has to move and cannot forgive the humiliation. Her quest for revenge turns into a feud that sets the whole district in chaos for several years and ends in the death of several dozens of men, including her own husband as well as Bergþóra's.

But how were seats allocated? In general, when a stranger arrives at a hall a scene similar to the following one takes place: "*Ganga þeir til stofunnar, ok var hon altjqlduð ok skipuð á báða bekki; skorti þar eigi glaum né gleði. Þeir ganga fyrir Steinþór ok kveðja hann vel. Hann tók vel kveðju þeirra. Hann spurði, hverir þeir væri. Þeir saggðu nafn sín ok fǫður síns.*"⁷³⁶ (They walked into the room and it was hung all round with tapestries, and the benches were occupied on both sides; there was no lack of merriment or good cheer. They walked towards Steinþórr and greeted him warmly. He received their greetings warmly. He asked who they were. They said their names and that of their father.) As is to be expected, the newcomers entering the hall go in search of the man of highest rank in order to ask for quarters. They should be able to recognize him easily, as he is the man sitting at the *qndvegi*. Once they find him and identify themselves, they ask for a place to stay as well as for a place to sit in the hall. But it seems that they made a mistake in locating the highest rank man in the room because Steinþórr then directs them to the host of the feast, as it is his and not Steinþórr's duty to assign the seats. Steinþórr tells them "*þat er ráð mitt, at þit gangið yfir fyrir hann Hávarð, hærucarlinn, er sitr gegnt mér; spyrið hann eptir hvárt hann vill taka við ykk*

⁷³⁵ *Nj XXXV*, p. 91.

⁷³⁶ *Hávís XIV*, p. 340.

eða eigi í sveit með sér.”⁷³⁷ (it is my advice that you two go to Hávarðr, the grey-haired man who sits opposite me; ask him whether he will take you or not into with him into his community.) The fact that they go to Steinþórr instead of to Hávarðr, mistaking him for the host of the feast, might have been due to a confusion between the opposing seats. Hávarðr is sitting across from Steinþórr, and for the newcomers it might have been difficult to distinguish who was the host and who was the guest of honour since both of them occupied an *qndvegi*. When they finally manage to locate the host, “*skipar þeim broðrum útar frá sér. Sátu þeir þá glaðir ok kátir.*”⁷³⁸ ([Hávarðr] seated the brothers farther out from him. They sat there glad and cheerful.) Their cheerfulness might not be due only to the fact that they found lodging but also to the fact that that the position they get is in accordance with their rank and that they consider themselves well placed.

The pattern to be found in most sagas follows this example; the newcomer enters the hall, identifies himself and his family, when his background is known he is assigned a place to sit according with his rank. However, the places are not always honourable ones, and people of lower strata and/or dubious morals tend to be seated apart. This could sometimes lead to trouble when other people disagreed with the way seats were allocated. A good example of this kind of situation can be found in *Honsa-Þóris saga*, where Þórir and his foster son arrive in Norðrtunga to a large gathering. “*Er þar fjöldi manna kominn, ok var sveininum gefit seturúm, en Þórir reikar á gólfinu.*”⁷³⁹ (A large number of men had arrived and the boy was given a seat, and Þórir strolled on the floor.) Þorvaldr, another visitor to the hall, is not familiar with the people of the district and finds this rather curious as, unlike the other guests, he is not aware of the fact that Þórir’s place is on the floor because he is a slanderous and selfish man who is at the time engaged in an unjust lawsuit against Blund-Ketill, a honourable man. Þorvaldr then inquires about the man on the floor:

⁷³⁷ *Hávís* XIV, p. 340.

⁷³⁸ *Hávís* XIV, p. 341.

⁷³⁹ *Høns* VII, p. 20.

'Hver er sjá maðr, er reikar um gólfít?' segir Þorvaldr. Arngrímr svarar: "Hann er barnfóstri minn." "Já," segir Þorvaldr, "hví skal honum eigi rúm gefask?" Arngrímr kvað hann eigi varða. "Eigi skal svá vera," sagði Þorvaldr ok lætr kalla hann til sín ok gefr honum rúm at sitja hjá sér.⁷⁴⁰

(‘Who is the man who is strolling on the floor?’ asks Þorvaldr. Arngrímr answers: ‘He is the foster-father of my son.’ ‘Really?’ says Þorvaldr, ‘why isn’t a seat given to him?’ Arngrímr said that that he was not a person of any importance. ‘It should not be like that’ said Þorvaldr, and has Þórir called over to him and gives him a place to sit next to him.)

Þorvaldr might have asked about the man on the floor for two reasons. First, the presence of Þórir might have struck him because Þórir was the only man not being properly seated. Second, he might have found it unusual to see someone with the appearance of a rich farmer and who was also fostering the guest’s son being assigned a place commonly assigned to slaves or children. Hence, he does not find it proper for a free man to be sitting in a place that does not correspond to his status and invites him to sit down beside him. Þorvaldr does not seem to be aware that sitting places were not allotted only on the base of economic status, but also according to the morality and honourable behaviour of the guest in question. Þorvaldr thus breaks the norms of social equilibrium chosen by the host through seating arrangements; and the result is that when Þórir sits down he starts talking with Þorvaldr and through slander convinces Þorvaldr to support him in his unjust case against Blund-Ketill. People try to talk Þorvaldr into abandoning the case. They advise him *“ger eigi þetta, Þorvaldr, því at eigi er góðum dreng at duga, þar sem hann er; en þú átt við þann um, er bæði er vitr ok vel at sér ok at qllu vinscell.”*⁷⁴¹ (don’t do this Þorvaldr, because it is not a noble-minded man that you are helping, and you fight against someone who is both wise and fine and very popular.) However he still supports Þórir and, as expected, the deal ends in a series of lawsuits and armed confrontations between honourable people, which leads to the

⁷⁴⁰ *Høns VII*, p. 19.

⁷⁴¹ *Høns VII*, p. 20.

burning of Blund-Ketill inside his farm.⁷⁴² The lesson that the saga seems to convey is that once the symbolic order of seating within the hall is altered then, as a consequence, the social order is also disrupted. Innocent men are killed; unjust lawsuits are supported and won; halls are burned down. One cannot disrupt the symbolic harmony without disturbing the social harmony.

However, people's positions could be upgraded within the hall without altering the social order, though this could only be achieved by accomplishing something which justified such a change of status. Perhaps the most famous example of this is that of Hqtr, in the legendary *Hrólf's saga kraka*. Hqtr is a farmer's son who goes to the king's hall looking for entertainment. There people start bullying him and when he opposes them "*síðan tóku þeir hann ok settu í beina sörp. En þat er hátr þeira um matmál ok svá sem af er etit hverju beini, þá kasta þeir til hans.*"⁷⁴³ (then they took him and stuck him into a pile of bones. It is their habit at mealtimes that when they have finished gnawing the meat from a bone, then they throw it at him.) In other words, Hqtr is placed in the least honourable place in the hall – the floor - and treated in the most humiliating way. While he is perfectly capable of surviving this treatment (having bones thrown at him) a similar 'game' proved fatal for the historical Anglo-Saxon Archbishop Ælfheah, in the year 1012, who was killed by a group of Norsemen who treated him in a similar fashion.⁷⁴⁴ Hqtr, however, endures this treatment until Bqðvarr rescues him from the bone-pile and seats him at the bench by his side. Even if he is now placed in a more honourable seat, the men do not consider that his status has changed and start once again throwing bones at him. Hqtr still acts like a coward, he still does not deserve his

⁷⁴² *Høns* VIII and IX.

⁷⁴³ *Hrólf* XXXIII, p. 62.

⁷⁴⁴ The *Anglo Saxon Chronicles*, manuscript E, reports that on 1012 Archbishop Ælfheah was captured by a group of Vikings who "led him to their 'hustings' on the Saturday in the octave of Easter, and then pelted him there with bones and the heads of cattle; and one of them struck him on the head with the butt of an axe, so that with the blow he sank down and his holy blood fell on the earth, and sent forth his holy soul to God's kingdom" *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* E: 1012, 142. Further on this kind of game, see Ian McDougall, 'Serious Entertainments: A Peculiar Type of Viking Atrocity', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 22 (1993), 201-25.

place among the honourable men, who are not pleased with his presence at the bench. However this changes soon after when, after having defeated a dragon, Bǫðvarr forces Hǫttir to drink its blood, which turns him into a valiant man. King Hrólfr acknowledges this change in his behaviour and admits Hǫttir among his champions and he is assigned an honourable place on the king's bench and the men consider him to be well-seated.⁷⁴⁵

Stories like this, of a peasant who upgrades his position in society, of a freed slave who is later to be identified as a man of high birth, or of a low-caste stranger who then proves to be a famous hero are a commonplace in saga literature, and they are to be found, most of all, among the *Fornaldar sagur*. This might be a literary motif to engage the audience present in the rooms in which the saga were read or recited. As Lars Lönnroth puts it: “one function of this motif is evidently to make the audience identify the performer with the traveller”⁷⁴⁶ or stranger sitting in the hall. It was a way of engaging the audience by presenting a society similar to theirs when it comes to the power-struggles and symbolic attitudes reflected through the politics behind seat-arrangements. Perhaps the main difference when it comes to this is that in literature it was easier to upgrade one's status than it was in reality.

In general, we can see that the hall is not only portrayed as a place for rejoicing. Apart from being the ideal and idealized place where friendships and loyalties are created or strengthened, the hall is also presented as the scene for hidden power-struggles and status-recognition presented through the intertwined protocol by which each attendant was assigned a place based on his status. The place each person occupied in the hall was a symbolic representation of the position each person occupied in society. The struggle to be allotted a better place in the hall was nothing but another way of epitomizing the struggle to acquire a better place in society. Perhaps that is the

⁷⁴⁵ *Hrólfr XXXVI*.

⁷⁴⁶ Lars Lönnroth, 'The Double Scene of Arrow-Odd's Drinking Contest', in *Medieval Narrative: A Symposium*, ed. by Hans Bekker-Nielsen and others (Odense: Odense University Press, 1979), pp. 94-119 (p. 96).

reason why saga literature puts more weight on describing the way in which seats were allotted in the hall than in describing the acts of comradeship that took place at the benches. The description of seating arrangements was both a way of characterizing individuals and their relation with other individuals as well as a way of adding information about the political situation of the area in which the saga takes place.

CHAPTER 5- DRINKING FEASTS: WEDDING, FUNERAL AND SEASONAL FEASTS

In Old Norse we find several formulaic expressions such as *drekka veizlu*, *drekka erfi*, *drekka brúðhlaup* or *drekka jól*. These expressions mean, if one were to do a word-by-word translation, to ‘drink a feast’, ‘drink a funeral’, ‘drink a wedding’ and ‘drink Christmas’, respectively. However, the element *drekka* (to drink) is, on these occasions, better translated as ‘to celebrate’. It seems that, at least in the mentality of Viking Age and Medieval Scandinavians, the act of drinking was intrinsically related to the act of celebrating. Perhaps, the act of *drekka brúðhlaup* or any other feast did not involve drinking at all, but the expression manifested a wish or an ideal of consuming alcohol in order to celebrate. In the following pages, I will study the major feast and possible drinking occasions in the Old Norse world and try to figure out the role, if any, that alcohol consumption played in their celebrations.

5.1- WEDDING FEASTS

According to the *Íslendinga sqgur*, marriages in Viking Age and Medieval Iceland seem to have been in most cases the result of an agreement between families in order to increase their power by creating new alliances. This does not mean that in some cases the marriage did not spring from love, but it seems that at least according to literary ‘reality’ the main motivation for a marriage was mainly political, economical and even sometimes aesthetical, this last being in some cases the closest approximation to the idea of romantic love. Thomas Bredsdorff in his *Chaos and Love: The Philosophy of The Icelandic Sagas* proved effectively that love is indeed the second pattern (after the quest for power) that motivates the action in the *Íslendinga sqgur*. However, in many cases most of what we hear of a newly wed couple is that “*takast nú ástir með*

þeim hjónum”⁷⁴⁷ (the couple came to love each other) or similar sentences to express that the affection came, if at all, only after they had begun their life together. Only in rare instances we do get a good insight into the blissful or miserable married life of the characters, like in the case of Njáll Þorgeirsson or of Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi in *Brennu-Njáls saga*.

In this section I will examine and focus on the evidence we have for both the arrangement of wedding feasts and the role that alcohol played in such ceremonies.⁷⁴⁸ I will start by examining the three different stages of the arrangement of the feasts as well as the logistics involved in the choice of place and host for the feast. The logistics of the ceremony are linked to the role that hosting a feast had in the quest for power in Old Norse society. This role is not only connected to the political manoeuvres that lay behind the union of families, but is also related to the ability to host a feast and thus offer alcoholic beverages which play an important role in Old Norse gift-giving culture.⁷⁴⁹ Unfortunately only a few scenes mention alcohol intake in the context of wedding ceremonies. In this section I will also examine those few scenes in order to try to understand the role that alcohol played in this ritual.

The sagas present three different stages in the marriage ceremony - namely the *festa*, then an intermediate period between *festa* and wedding and finally; the *boð*. The first stage of the marriage ceremony is the *festa*, that is, the settling of the marriage agreement; the betrothal itself was referred to as *brullaupsstefna*. In it representatives of both of the interested parts would meet and arrange the bride-price (*brúðkaup*, literally ‘bride bargain’) and establish the time and place to celebrate the wedding feast (*boð*).

THE *FESTA*

⁷⁴⁷ *Fimnb* XXIX.

⁷⁴⁸ For other social aspects of Old Norse weddings see Roberta Frank, ‘Marriage in Twelfth and Thirteenth-Century Iceland’, *Viator*, 4 (1973) 473-84 and; Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995), pp. 17-64.

⁷⁴⁹ Alcohol as part of the Old Norse gift-giving culture will be studied in Chapter 6

As we will see in this section, during the *festu*, the place and time for the wedding feast were set. In general, we can see that the wedding feast took place at the farm of the most honourable or powerful member of the families involved in the agreement.⁷⁵⁰ The reason for this may have well been that the richest and most powerful host would be able to provide the best feast and parting gifts for the guests, thus increasing with this his circle of influence. This honour and influence gained through the feast would also be transmitted to the groom and by association to the father of the bride. So, it might have been in the best interests of both families as well as of the newly wed couple that the feast was hosted by the one most likely to provide the most honourable feast and thus grant them the greatest support network. Meanwhile, on the side of the feast-host, he gained new allegiances, as both the newly married couple as well as the members of their families would create bonds with him and find themselves with the obligation to return the favour of hospitality and alcohol-gift-giving.⁷⁵¹

On some occasions the desire to celebrate the feast at the farm of the most powerful man as well as the reasons for the choice are made explicit: “*Þá mælti Gunnarr: ‘Bið ek enn, at þú látir hér vera boðit í Hvammi, ok mun þá gqrt verða með mestri sæmd.’*”⁷⁵² (Then Gunnarr said ‘I want to ask also that you host the wedding feast here at Hvammr so that it will take place with most honour of all.’) It seems that on some occasions people would offer to host the wedding feast in order not to attend one at the farm of someone else of less honour or in order not to be considered of inferior rank than some other possible host. Thus, we have, for example, that in *Þorsteins saga hvíta*, for the wedding of Helga and Þorstein “*Fór Helga þá til Hofis með Þorsteini fagra, því at Þorsteinn hvíti vildi brúðkaupit inni hafa, því at hann þóttisk*

⁷⁵⁰ This also includes extended family.

⁷⁵¹ In general, the gift of alcohol was a gift that only a few could pay back, thus leaving the guests with the obligation to repay this gift with friendship, loyalty and allegiance if they could not return the favour. This aspect of gift-giving as a way of gaining power will be studied, in connection with alcohol and feasts of course, in Chapter 6.

⁷⁵² *Höns XI*, p. 32.

hrumr til at fara at sækja brúðkaupit annars staðar, ok af því var svá gqrt.”⁷⁵³ (Helga went to Hof with Þorsteinn the fair because Þorsteinn the white wanted to hold the wedding feast himself since he thought it inappropriate to attend the feast at someone else’s, that is why it was done in this way.) The problem of arranging the wedding feast’s location and thus determining the most honourable person to host it could actually lead to some problems when there was more than one candidate, as was, for example, the case in *Íslendinga saga*. In it, Sæmundr, considered to be “*göfgastr maðr á Íslandi í þenna tíma*”⁷⁵⁴ (the most honourable man in Iceland at that time) made arrangements to marry Langlíf, the daughter of the Orcadian earl, Haraldr Maddaðarson. However the wedding never took place because “*Sæmundr vildi eigi sækja brúðkaup í Orkneyjar, en jarlinn vildi eigi senda hana út hingat.*”⁷⁵⁵ (Sæmundr would not go to his wedding feast in the Orkney Islands and the earl would not send her from the Orkneys.) The saga does not state the reason for these negatives to attend the feast at someone else’s place, especially because everything seemed to be favourable for the wedding. However, it seems that the disagreement sprouted from the different perspectives on the place where the feast should be held, as none of the possible hosts would admit to being less honourable than the other. Thus, we can observe that hosting a fortnight-long wedding feast was not perceived as an economic burden; it was mostly perceived as a way of showing-off economic solvency and thus a way of acquiring power. It was a way of proving that one was the most honourable member of both families and, most probably, another way of exhibiting that one was able to host a well provided feast, where – expensive- alcoholic beverages were abundant.

As with many other kinds of contracts, the “*fešta*” seems to have been sealed by both of the interested parties shaking hands and perhaps also sharing a drink. *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* preserves a reference to what seems to have been a brew drunk on

⁷⁵³ *ÞHvíl* VII, pp. 17-18.

⁷⁵⁴ *Ísl* XVII, p. 242.

⁷⁵⁵ *Ísl* XVII, p. 242.

these occasions, called *festarql* (betrothal-*ql*): “*drekkur hann enn it sterkasta festaröl.*”⁷⁵⁶ (then he drank the strongest *festarql*.) This betrothal-*ql* might have been just a normal *ql* that was drunk on the occasion of a betrothal as a means of sealing an agreement more than an *ql* especially brewed for the event, as was the case with the *Jólaql*. The only other reference to drinking in order to seal a marriage agreement comes from *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfjfls*: “*ok með hennar samþykki festir Gunnar Helgu sér til handa, og hófst þar in sæmilegasta veizla, og var þeirra brúðkaup drukkið á Hörgslandi.*”⁷⁵⁷ (Gunnarr betrothed Helga with her consent and agreed to host a honourable feast, and then their betrothal was drunk at Hörgsland.) No other saga mentions drinking or toasting after a betrothal has taken place. However, even if the evidence for drinking a toast to seal a betrothal agreement might appear very weak, coming from a two occurrences -one from a rather fictitious *Fornaldar saga*- we can not disregard the possibility that this was an actual practice.

THE PERIOD BETWEEN *FESTA* AND *BOD*

During the span of time between betrothal and wedding, the feast was arranged. The literature shows no evidence of any special rites of separation or transition taking place in the interim and nor does the groom or the bride seem to occupy a special position within their community. During this period, the feast was arranged and provisions were gathered. *Finnboga saga ramma* provides us with a good example of preparations for a wedding feast. In it, the feast arrangements for Finnbogi's wedding are described in the following fashion: “*Síðan bjuggust þeir við veizlu. Eru öxn felld og mungát heitt, mjöðr blandinn ok mönnum boðit.*”⁷⁵⁸ (Then they got ready for the feast. Oxen were killed and *mungát* was brewed, *mjöðr* was blended and people were invited.) Thus, the essential preparations for the feast consisted in preparing enough food and

⁷⁵⁶ *HG* II, p. 58.

⁷⁵⁷ *GunnK* XVI, p. 374.

⁷⁵⁸ *Finnb* XXIX, p. 301.

drink and gathering enough guests to make the feast an honourable one. Other sources do not mention so explicitly what the preparations consisted of. In most cases we are just informed that after the betrothal “*var at veizlu snúit ok víða mönnum til boðit um heraðit*”⁷⁵⁹ (the feast was arranged and people from far and wide were invited to the wedding feast) or something similar. However, when we read sentences such as “*Liðr til boðsins. Guðrún hefir mikinn viðbúnað ok tilqflun*”⁷⁶⁰ (The time for the wedding feast approached. Guðrún made great preparations and gathered a vast supply of provisions) we can well assume that people in the farm were engaged mainly in slaughtering and most of all in gathering and/or purchasing corn or honey for brewing as well as in collecting enough fuel for the process.

THE BOÐ

There are nearly 300 references “*boð*” (wedding feasts) and “*brullaup*” (weddings) mentioned in the *Íslendinga sqgur*.⁷⁶¹ The Old Norse term “*boð*” has four possible meanings: a bid; a wedding feast; a bidding or commandment; and a message. However, in the saga corpus the word is most often used in the sense of ‘wedding feast’ while its other meanings appear more frequently in the legal corpus.

Looking at the time of the year chosen to celebrate wedding feasts in the literary corpus, one notices that almost by rule of thumb they took place during two specific periods: around mid-summer and during the winter nights. As for the summer weddings, we can see that most of them took place around mid-summer: “*var boðidt hálfum mánuði fyrir mitt sumar*”⁷⁶² (the wedding feast was half a month before mid-summer); “*skyldi boð vera hálfum mánaði eptir mitt sumar*”⁷⁶³ (the wedding feast

⁷⁵⁹ *Flj X*, p. 238.

⁷⁶⁰ *Laxd LXVIII*, p. 201.

⁷⁶¹ *OrðT* returns 241 entries for the term *boð* and 45 entries for the term *brullaup*. See *OrðT*, *boð* and *brullaup*.

⁷⁶² *Nj XC*, p. 225.

⁷⁶³ *Nj II*, p. 9.

should be half a month after mid-summer); “*skal Snorri hafa boð þat inni, ok skal vera at miðju sumri*”⁷⁶⁴ (Snorri would host the wedding feast and it should take place at mid-summer) or; in more general terms “*brullaupið vera at Þverá hálfum mánuði eptir þing*”⁷⁶⁵ (the wedding was to take place at Þverá half a month after the þing.) These are some of the most common dates at which summer weddings took place: on most occasions close to mid-summer, that is, around July 28.⁷⁶⁶ The winter weddings took place, similarly, around the period of the winter-nights, that is, the three days that marked the beginning of winter, which in the Viking Age “fell in the period October 10-17.”⁷⁶⁷ Thus, we have most winter wedding-feasts arranged to take place: “*boð stofnat at veturnóttum*”⁷⁶⁸ (the wedding-feast was set to take place during the winter-nights); “*var brullaup á kveðit at vetrnóttum.*”⁷⁶⁹ (the wedding was set to the winter-nights); “*Skyldi það boð vera um haustið á Geirlandi um veturnætr.*”⁷⁷⁰ (That wedding-feast should take place in the autumn, in Geirland, during the winter-nights.) Other times of the year are exceptionally appointed, but in general most weddings took place at these two particular times of the year.

The reasons for the wedding feasts to be arranged to take place around mid-summer and the winter-nights most probably follow economical reasons. Van Gennep proposes that

The impact of a marriage on a group’s daily life seems to me to explain [...] why marriages are held in spring, winter, and autumn –i.e., at the time of little activity and not at the moment when there is work on the fields. I would not go so far as to deny a persistence of the ancient periods of rut or the influence of celestial cycles [...] But this influence hardly explains the frequency of marriages in the autumn. It is often said, on the other hand, that this time is chosen because the agricultural work is completed, the granaries and the treasuries are full, and there

⁷⁶⁴ *Laxd* LXX, p. 207.

⁷⁶⁵ *Ljósv* XII.

⁷⁶⁶ *IED*, *sumar*.

⁷⁶⁷ Árni Björnsson, *Icelandic Feasts and Holidays: Celebrations, Past and Present*, trans. by Mary Hallmundsson and others (Reykjavík: Icelandic Review Series, 1980), p. 65.

⁷⁶⁸ *Laxd* XLVI, p. 139.

⁷⁶⁹ *Vall* I, p. 235.

⁷⁷⁰ *GunnK* X, p. 377.

is good opportunity for bachelors to establish a home for themselves for the winter.⁷⁷¹

Van Gennepe's point of view seems to be confirmed by Þiðrandi's refusal to attend a certain feast during the working period "*Þiðrandi heitir ferðinni, er á liði sumarit ok heyverkum er loki*"⁷⁷² (Þiðrandi promised to go (to the feast) when the summer was gone and the hay-making finished.) The reaction to his decision not to attend the feast at once is that "*Ketill segir, at Þiðranda færi vel.*"⁷⁷³ (Ketill says that Þiðrandi acts correctly.) And most probably he did, refusing to feast while there was still plenty of work to be done at his farm.

There are two other probable reasons for wedding feasts to be celebrated at the beginning of the winter. The first is that by then all the Icelandic merchants due to return to Iceland for the winter would have arrived, most probably bringing as their cargoes enough malt and corn to guarantee a good alcohol supply for the winter which could also be used for the wedding feasts. If that was not the case, the groom could still sail abroad to obtain corn for the feast brews, as is the case of Oddr, in *Bandamanna saga*, who as soon as his wedding is set arranges a expedition to the Orkneys in order to buy malt and corn and thus provide his guests with a splendid feast.⁷⁷⁴ Also, it was at the beginning of the winter that cattle were slaughtered in order to guarantee that the remaining stock would have enough food to survive the winter. These two factors should have provided farmsteads with a surplus of meat and corn that could well be used in feasting.

Another probable reason to hold wedding feasts at these times of the year could have been also of an economic nature, for then they could be celebrated in conjunction with other festivities or other weddings as well as with funerals. There are, indeed, a

⁷⁷¹ Arnold van Gennepe, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. by Monika B. Vizedom and others (London: Routledge, 1960), p. 139.

⁷⁷² *Flj XIV*, p. 258.

⁷⁷³ *Flj XIV*, p. 258.

⁷⁷⁴ *Band XI*, p. 358.

few instances in which two wedding feasts are celebrated together⁷⁷⁵ while many of the weddings set for the beginning of the winter may have coincided with the winter-nights' feasts. This could have helped the organizers to share and/or save in the costs involved in the preparation of the feasts.

DRINKING AT WEDDING FEASTS

In most of the references to wedding feasts the narrator does not stop to depict the events nor does he stop to describe the actual wedding ceremony. In only a few instances is the seating arrangement described, and from these we can gather that men and women sat at different tables.⁷⁷⁶ Perhaps the best descriptions of seating arrangements and wedding feast activities in the sagas come from *Brennu-Njáls saga*. According to this saga, it seems that it was customary that “*skipuðusk menn þar í sæti, en konur skipuðu palli*.”⁷⁷⁷ (the men were arranged at the seats and the women were arranged at the dais.) The groom “*sat á miðjan bekk*”⁷⁷⁸ (sat in the middle of the bench) while “*brúður sat á miðjum palli*.”⁷⁷⁹ (the bride sat in the middle of the dais.) The compound word *brúðbekkr*⁷⁸⁰ (bride's bench) also attests the gender-oriented seating arrangements on these occasions. A few women seem to have been appointed to look after the guests “*Þórhildr gengr um beina, ok báru þær Bergþóra mat á borð*.”⁷⁸¹ (Þórhildr waited upon the guests, she and Bergþóra carried the food to the tables.)

There are also just a few references to the actual drinking scenes during weddings, and on all occasions it is just mentioned as part of the feast and not as holding a ritual significance in itself. So, in *Gísla saga Súrssonar* we are told that

⁷⁷⁵ For example see *Kjaln* II and XVII and *Nj* XXXIV.

⁷⁷⁶ Sitting arrangements at feasts have been discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

⁷⁷⁷ *Nj* VI, pp. 21-22.

⁷⁷⁸ *Nj* XXXIV, p. 88.

⁷⁷⁹ *Nj* XXXIV, p. 89.

⁷⁸⁰ This word appears only twice in the saga corpus, namely in *Svarfd* XVI and *Laxd* LXIX. See *ÓrðT*, *brúðbekkr*.

⁷⁸¹ *Nj* XXXIV, p. 89.

“drykkja skyldi vera at hvorutveggja boðinu ok var stráð gólfð á Sæbóli.”⁷⁸² (there was supposed to be drinking at both weddings and the floor was covered with straw at Sæból.) During a wedding feast in Norway we are also told that “brúðrin var á bekk sett ok öll drykkjustofan alskipuð af mönnum ok konungr í háseti”⁷⁸³ (the bride was sitting at the bench and the drinking hall was fully manned and the king sat on the high-seat) which may also be taken as a reference to active drinking during the feast, but still we have no description of ritual drinking, if there was actually a ritual drinking at all. Similarly in the two instances in which drinking takes place during a wedding feast in *Brennu-Njáls saga* it is only mentioned as part of the feast: “drekka þeir veizluna, ok fer hon vel fram.”⁷⁸⁴ (They drank throughout the feast and it went well) and “nú sátu menn hver í sinu rími ok drukku ok váru kátir.”⁷⁸⁵ (Now every man sat in his seat and drank and were merry.) Finally, in *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls* all we are told is that “drakk hann brullaup til hennar.”⁷⁸⁶ (he celebrated [his] wedding to her.) Perhaps of all the scenes that involve drinking at a wedding feast it is only that from *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls* XVI that may show some hints of ritual drinking as part of the ceremony. This would be, if at all, expressed in the act of toasting for the bride’s wedding. However this interpretation seems far-fetched, and in general it would belong, together with the other scenes, to a mere description of joyful celebration than to an actual description of a wedding ritual.

Perhaps the best description of the activities that took place at wedding feasts comes from a completely different kind of source. This is the Eddic poem *Þrymskviða*, dated to the beginning of the thirteenth century,⁷⁸⁷ in which Þórr travels to Jötunheim disguised as a bride in order to marry a

⁷⁸² *Gisl* XX,

⁷⁸³ *Vígl* VI, p. 73.

⁷⁸⁴ *Nj* VI, p. 22.

⁷⁸⁵ *Nj* XXXIV, pp. 89-90.

⁷⁸⁶ *GunnK* XVI, pp. 376-77.

⁷⁸⁷ See Alfred Jakobsen, ‘*Þrymskviða*’, in *Medieval Scandinavia*, ed. by Pulsiano, pp. 678-79.

Jqtunn and thus recover his stolen hammer. Just as in the examples from saga literature, the poem describes a wedding feast involving a banquet with large amounts of food and alcohol:

Var þar at qveldi um komið snimma
oc fyr iotna ql fram borit;
einn át oxa, átta laxa,
krásir allar, þær er konor scyldo,
*dracc Sifiar verr sáld þriú miðar.*⁷⁸⁸

(They arrived there soon in the evening / and in front of the *Jqtunnar ql* was served / he alone ate an ox, eight salmon, / all the delicacies which were intended for the women, / Sif's husband drank three casks of *mjqðr*.)

Even though the large amounts of food and drink consumed by Þórr are of a farcical nature, the victuals listed in the poem may represent the actual foodstuff consumed at wedding feasts. As we have seen, drinking and eating were central parts of the feast, but, again, there are no elements that could be considered as ritual or symbolic drinking in order to celebrate the wedding in the poem. The symbolic union seems to be represented more by the gifts presented to the bride in order to show friendship and love, and thus welcome her to her new family:

Inn kom in arma iotna systir,
hin er brúðfiár biðia þorði:
'Láttu þér af hqndom hringa rauða,
ef þú qðlaz vill ástir minar,
*ástir minar, alla hylli.*⁷⁸⁹

(In came the wretched *Jqtunn's* sister / the one who dared to ask for the bride-fee: / '[you shall] hand over the red rings / if you will gain for yourself my affection, / my affection, every favour.)

Þórr's intended sister-in-law demands the *brúðkaup* in order to welcome him/her to the family and gain all her affection. Perhaps this expresses the role of the valuables that the bride took with her. Maybe these were intended to gain friendships in her new family through gift-giving. *Þrymskviða* is, indeed, a humorous and satiric poem. But in order to

⁷⁸⁸ *Þrk* 24.

⁷⁸⁹ *Þrk* XXIX.

be effectively satiric it must present elements that correspond with reality in order to suspend the disbelief. Perhaps some of the elements of the wedding ceremony that it presents correspond to factual wedding traditions, representing the proper attire (but the wrong bride), the actual banqueting (but taken to a carnivalesque extreme) and the actual role of the *brúðkaup* as an instrument to gain friendships with the bride's new family (but this new family is a horrific sister-in-law).

In general we have seen that weddings were celebrated at times of the year in which a surplus of food and drink could be obtained and at the times of the year in which the farming activities decreased or ceased. This could guarantee not only a proper attendance but also that the feast could be celebrated with due honour not only to the couple but also to their families. Honour seems to have been a central element in the decision of the place where the feast was to be celebrated, and perhaps the host's honour was also at stake in arranging a proper feast with enough food and drink for all the guests. Drinking seems to have been a central element both in sealing the wedding agreement and at the wedding feast itself. However, the literature does not provide any clues to what could be a symbolic use of alcohol for celebrating the union.

5.2- FUNERAL FEASTS. -DRINKING THE *ERFI*

Old Norse literature records several instances in which people gather at an *erfi*, or funeral feast, in order to drink to the memory of the deceased. However, this ritual drinking seems to have more purposes attached to it than the mere honouring of the deceased. The *erfi* seems to have been a rite of passage perhaps more relevant to the change of status of the living than to the change of status of the deceased. Throughout this section, I will analyze the ways in which this ritual drinking is portrayed in the literary sources. As we will see, it appears to be that the *erfi* corresponds, in the minds of the saga writers, more to a ritual performed in the legendary past than to an actual

practice during the centuries in which the sagas were committed to writing. In this section I will also analyze the social role and relevance that these feasts seem to have had for the culture we are studying.

IED defines the noun *erfi* as “a wake, a funeral feast”⁷⁹⁰ and its associated verb *at erfa* as “to honour with a funeral feast; to inherit”.⁷⁹¹ *AEW* defines it as “*leichenfeier, erbe*”⁷⁹² and relates it to the Latin *orbis* “*beraubt von*” (robbed off) and the Greek *orphanos* “*verwaist*” (orphaned).⁷⁹³ These words are related to the nouns *erfð* and *erfingi* meaning ‘inheritance’ and ‘an heir’ respectively. These words may find a common origin in the word *arfí*, which “originally meant cattle [and later shifted its meaning to refer to] inheritance, patrimony”.⁷⁹⁴ *IEW* relates it to the root *arfr* “*ochse*”⁷⁹⁵ (ox). Thus, the *erfi* could be interpreted as a feast in which the dead is honoured, but also as an inheritance feast in which the heir receives, in front of several witnesses, the goods and rank of the deceased. The role of the feast might have been, then, both to honour the deceased as well as to gather together a large number of people who would bear witness to, and therefore legitimate, the new status of the heir or heirs.

The literature clearly represents this twofold role of the *erfi* as a rite of passage for both the deceased and the living. As Nilsson Stutz puts it, “the internal structure of the ritual defines clearly the participants’ roles, facilitates the transition emotionally and, most simply, makes the social change more evident to all involved.”⁷⁹⁶ However, the ways in which the *erfi* are represented in the literature tend to focus the attention mainly on one of these two rôles. That is, *erfi* are portrayed mainly either as feasts at which the deceased is to be honoured or as feasts at which the heir is to legitimate his

⁷⁹⁰ *IED, erfi.*

⁷⁹¹ *IED, erfa.*

⁷⁹² *AEW, erfi.*

⁷⁹³ See *AEW, erfi.*

⁷⁹⁴ *IED, erfð* and *arfr.*

⁷⁹⁵ See *IEW, arfr.*

⁷⁹⁶ Liv Nilsson Stutz, *Embodied Rituals and Ritualized Bodies: Tracing Ritual Practices in Late Mesolithic Burials*, in *Acta Archaeologica Lundensia Series*, 46 (Lund: Stockholm & Wiksell Intl, 2003), p. 67.

new status in society. The representations of these roles are not exclusive of each other, but usually one of these roles is more predominant in the description of the wake.

5.2.1- THE *ERFI* AS AN INHERITANCE FEAST

The descriptions of *erfi* as ceremonies in which the successor takes possession of the rank and goods of the deceased are far more numerous than those in which the main purpose of the feast is to honour the memory of the dead. Of course this does not necessarily mean that the deceased was not mourned and that the bereaved cared more about the act of succession than about mourning. However, as will be seen in the following pages, it appears that the *erfi* was perceived as a ceremony whose main purpose was the transmission of power and status, while the mourning and funcrary rites were considered to be a separate ritual.

In chapter 36 of his *Ynglinga saga* Snorri Sturluson tells us about the *erfi* customs during the times of the legendary King Ingjaldr.

Þat var síðvenja í þann tíma, þar er erfi skyldi gera eptir konunga eða jarla, þá skyldi sá, er gerði ok til arfs skyldi leiða, sitja á skqrinni fyrir háætímu 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 háætí, þat sem átti faðir hans. Var hann þá kominn til arfs alls eptir hann.⁷⁹⁷

(It was the custom at that time, when an *erfi* should be prepared for a king or an earl, that the one who prepared it and was to receive the inheritance should sit at the edge in front of the high-seat until the toast [or goblet] called the *bragafull* was brought in; then he should stand up and go towards the *bragafull* and make a solemn vow, then gulp down the beaker; then he was to be led to the high-seat, which belonged to his father. Then he was allowed to receive all his inheritance.)

As we can see, the act of drinking and making an oath seem to have been the central elements in the change of status ritual. It is only after quaffing the goblet and making an oath that the heir is allowed to take possession of his father's status and possessions. Central to this ritual is also the act of drinking the *bragafull*, which is a compound word containing the elements *bragr* (best) and *full* (toast or goblet). Thus the name of this toast (or goblet), *bragafull*, means literally 'best of toasts' (or 'best of goblets').

⁷⁹⁷ *Yng XXXVI*, p. 66.

According to *IED* “it seems properly to mean ‘the king’s toast’”⁷⁹⁸ as ‘*bragr*’ can also be rendered as ‘king’. Lee explains that “the cup drunk in honour of the dead person was called *full* in depictions of the pagan period, but *minni* in Christian times.”⁷⁹⁹ However, the 4 instances in which a *full* is drunk in the *Islendinga sqgur* do not correspond to funerals.⁸⁰⁰ The only other occasion on which this toast is mentioned in the literary sources seems to confirm this last rendering of *bragafull*. This reference also occurs in *Heimskringla* when, in *Hákonar saga góða*, we are told that during sacrificial feasts the heathen used to drink *ql* and toasts to Óðinn, Njqrðr and Freyr. Then, after these toasts had been drunk,

*skyldi þat drekka til sigrs ok rikis konungi sínum –en síðan Njarðar full ok Freys full til árs ok friðar. Þá var mqrqum mqrnnum títt at drekka þar næst bragafull. Menn drukku ok full frænda sinna, þeirra er heygðir hqfðu verið, ok váru þat minni kqlluð.*⁸⁰¹

(one should then drink to the glory and might of his king –and then Njqrðr’s toast and Freyr’s toast for abundance and peace. Many men used to drink next the *bragafull*. Men also drank a toast for their friends, those who had already been buried, and that was called a *minni* [memorial toast].)

Thus it seems that the *bragafull* is a toast drunk in the honour of the king both at *erfi* and feasts. In the case of *Ynglinga saga* it was most probably drunk in the memory of the dead king, though it can also be interpreted as the toast by which the heir becomes king himself.

The only other occasion in which the ritual surrounding the *erfi* is described in our sources occurs in *Þorsteins þátrr bæjarmagns*, counted among the *Fornaldar sqgur* and dated to the late thirteenth century. In it Goðmundr the son of the deceased King Goðmundr⁸⁰² of Glæsisvellir travels to the land of the King Geirrqðr, a *Jqtunn* of whom all the previous kings of Glæsisvellir have been tributaries. The reason for his journey to

⁷⁹⁸ *IED*, *bragr*.

⁷⁹⁹ Lee, 122.

⁸⁰⁰ The term *full* appears in *Eg* LXXII (bis), and XLIV (bis). See *OrðT*, *full*.

⁸⁰¹ *HakG* XIV, p. 168.

⁸⁰² The name ‘Goðmundr’ seems to correspond more to a title than to a personal name, as the same Goðmundr puts it: “*Faðir minn hét Úlfheðinn trausti. Hann var kallaðr Goðmundr sem allir aðrir, þeir á Glæsisvöllum búa.*” (My father was called Úlfheðinn Trusty. He was called Goðmundr as all the others that live at Glæsisvellir.) *ÞorstBm* V, p. 329.

Jqtunheim is that “*Hefir konungr gert mér boð, at ek skyldi drekka erfi eftir föður minn ok taka slíkar nafnbætr sem faðir minn hafði*”⁸⁰³ (The king has sent me a message, that I shall drink *erfi* for my father and take such a rank as my father had.) Once they arrive at King Geirrǫðr’s they are led into the hall in which the king is drinking. Then the ritual begins. When Goðmundr enters the hall he is welcomed by the king and then

*Goðmundr settist á skörina fyrir öndvegit gagnvart konungi. Var sá síðr þeira, at konungsson skyldi ekki í háseti sitja, fyrr en hann hafði tekit nafnbætr eftir föður sinn ok drukkit væri it fyrsta full. Ríss þar nú upp in vænsta veizla, ok drukku menn glaðir ok kátir ok fóru síðan at sofa.*⁸⁰⁴

[Goðmundr sat down at the edge in front of the high-seat opposite the king. It was their custom that the son of the king should not sit on the high-seat before he had taken the rank of his father and before the first toast was drunk. Now began a great feast, and men drank gladly and cheerfully and afterwards they went to sleep.]

Even though the feast begins the night the heir arrives, the actual status transition does not take place until the following day. During the morning the feast continues, and in it

*Síðan tók konungr guðvefjarskikkju ok lagði yfir Goðmund ok gaf honum konungsnafn, tók síðan horn mikit ok drakk til Goðmundi. Hann tók við horninu ok þakkaði konungi. Síðan stóð Goðmundr upp ok sté á stokkinn fyrir sæti konungs ok strengdi þess heit, at hann skal engum konungi þjóna né hlýðni veita, meðan Geirrǫðr konungr lifði. [...] Síðan drakk Goðmundr af horninu ok gekk til sætis síns. Váru menn þá glaðir ok kátir.*⁸⁰⁵

(Then the king took a costly kirtle and laid it over Goðmundr and gave him the title of king, then he took a great horn and drank a toast for Goðmundr. He then took the horn and thanked the king and made this oath, that he should never serve nor obey any other king as long as Geirrǫðr lived [...] Then Goðmundr drank from the horn and went to his seat. Everyone was glad and cheerful.)

Except for the use of the costly kirtle, the rituals described both in *Ynglinga saga* and in *Þorsteins þáttur bæjarmagns* are basically the same. In this last case also the swearing of an oath and the drinking are essential to the transition ritual. Not much attention is paid to the memory of the deceased.⁸⁰⁶ It is also interesting to note that what Snorri describes as a pre-Christian tradition here is now attached to the *Jqtmar*. This might reflect the contemporary perception of the *erfi* as a purely pagan (and thus impious?) ritual. This

⁸⁰³ *ÞorstBm* V, p. 329.

⁸⁰⁴ *ÞorstBm* V, p. 330.

⁸⁰⁵ *ÞorstBm* VI, p. 331.

⁸⁰⁶ Due to the late composition of the *þáttur* one cannot discard the possibility that its author was familiar with *Ynglinga saga*.

last idea seems to be sound, for most of the references to *erfi* in the literature appear in the *Fornaldar sqgur* while most of the few that are mentioned in the *Íslendinga sqgur* take place in the period just after the settlement of Iceland. And, while not a single *erfi* is mentioned in the *Sturlunga saga* the references in *Heimskringla* are attached to events that took place before the Christianization of Norway. Thus, it seems that in the mentality of the saga composers the *erfi* is a rite that corresponds mostly to the legendary and pre-Christian past. For example, in an Anglo-Saxon context, we have “material evidence that indicates some form of funerary feasting ceases after the Conversion of the Anglo-Saxons”⁸⁰⁷ and that might have been the case also in the Old Norse world

We know little about what went on at the actual *erfi* apart from drinking a ritual toast and swearing an oath. They were feasts to honour the dead and to legitimize the change of status of the heir. As Nilsson Stutz puts it:

Death can be seen as a life crisis. Aside from the literal sense of it, death is truly a life crisis that needs to be handled, first, by the dying and those closest to him or her. And of course, with death the survivors need to seek a way to return to functioning life.⁸⁰⁸

But in many cases the *erfi* are represented as feasts to celebrate more the transition of the living than the memory of the deceased. They appear to be more feasts to celebrate and facilitate the continuation of life, or at least the continuation of social standards.

Accordingly, in many cases, the *erfi* were celebrated not immediately after someone’s death, but mostly when the conditions were better to grant the largest attendance to the feast and thus add to the status of the heir. Thus, in the late thirteenth century *Ragnars saga loðbrókar* we hear of an *erfi* which took place three years after the death of a king:

Sá atburðr hefir verit út í löndum, at einn konungr átti tvá sonu, ok tók hann sótt ok andaðist, en synir hans vilja drekka erfi eftir hann. Þeir bjóða til þessar veislu svá, at allir menn skyldu koma þangat, þeir er á

⁸⁰⁷ Christina Lee, *Feasting the Dead: Food and Drink in Anglo-Saxon Burial Rituals*, Anglo-Saxon Studies, 9 (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2007), p. 104.

⁸⁰⁸ Nilsson Stutz, p. 67.

þrimr vetrum inum næstum spyrja þetta. Nú spyrst þetta víða um lönd. Ok á þessum þrimr vetrum búast þeir við þessi veislu. Ok er þat sumar kemr, er erfi skyldi drekka, ok sú stund, er ákveðin var, þá verðr svá mikit fjölmenni, at engi vissi dæmi til, hvé mikit var, ok váru margar stórar hallir skipaðar ok mörg tjöld úti.⁸⁰⁹

(It happened in foreign lands, that a king had two sons; he became ill and died and his sons wanted to drink an *erfi* in his honour. They announced this feast thus: that all men should attend, they who hear of it in the following three winters. Now this was reported wide through the lands. And during these three winters they prepared for this feast. And when the summer came, and the *erfi* was to be drunk [celebrated], and [when] it was the time that had been announced, there was such a large gathering that no one could judge how many were there, and many large halls were made ready and many tents were set outside.)

Laxdóla saga, an *Íslendinga saga* also dated to the mid thirteenth century, provides us with another example of a long span of time in between the moment of death and the celebration of the *erfi*; and it also provides an explanation for such a delay. In it Hǫskuldr Dala-Kollsson, one of the first settlers of Iceland, dies sometime in the early tenth century. Concerning his burial we are told that “*Litit var fé borit í haug hjá honum*”⁸¹⁰ (Little wealth was buried with him in his mound) maybe implying that his heirs did not care much about the well-being of their father in the afterlife. However, when it comes to the feast, it is described as the second largest feast ever celebrated in Iceland: “*Var þat svá mikit fjölmenni, at þat er sagn manna flestra, at eigi skyrti níu hundruð. Þessi hefir qnnur veizla fjölmennust verit á Íslandi, en sú qnnur, er Hjaltasynir gerðu erfi eftir fǫður sinn; þar váru tólf hundruð.*”⁸¹¹ (It was so crowded that it is said by many men that it had no less than nine hundred [guests].⁸¹² This is the second most crowded feast there has been in Iceland, and the most attended is the *erfi* that the Hjaltasons arranged for their father; there were twelve hundred [guests]⁸¹³.) The saga reports that his heirs “*þeir broðr tal um þat, at þeir muni efna til erfis eptir fǫður sinn, því at þat var þá tízka í þat mund.*”⁸¹⁴ (the brothers discuss that they should prepare an *erfi* for their father, because that was the custom in that time.) However the

⁸⁰⁹ *Ragn* XIX, p. 281.

⁸¹⁰ *Laxd* XXVI, p. 73.

⁸¹¹ *Laxd* XXVII, p. 74.

⁸¹² That is actually 1080 guests, as the Old Norse term *hundruð* referred to 120.

⁸¹³ That is, 1440 guests.

⁸¹⁴ *Laxd* XXVI, p. 73.

feast does not seem to be intended principally to honour the dead as much as it is intended to add to the social prestige of the heirs. As Hǫskuldr Dala-Kollsson dies in the autumn, it is difficult for the bereaved to gather enough provisions and it is also difficult for the guests to travel. So they decide to postpone the feast to the next summer because “*Sva lízk mér, sem ekki megí svá skjótt at þessi veislu snúa, ef hon skal svá virðulig verða, sem oss þótti sóma.*”⁸¹⁵ (It seems to me that we cannot celebrate this feast soon, not if it should be as worthy as to honour us.) It appears then, that the feast is intended to honour the new status of the heirs as well as to gather as many witnesses to this newly acquired role. Thus, at the end of the feast it is said that “*Þessi veizla var in skqruligsta at qlly, ok fengu þeir bróðr mikinn sóma.*”⁸¹⁶ (This feast was magnificent in all respects, and gained much honour for the brothers.) This great amount of honour for the brothers was acquired at the expense, the saga claims, of inviting the entire *Alþingi*, including *goðar*, farmers, beggars and anyone who cared to attend to a fortnight-long feast at which 900 guests⁸¹⁷ were entertained.⁸¹⁸

The largest *erfi* reported in the sagas was celebrated after the death of Hjalti Þórðarson. This is attested briefly in *Landnámabók*, *Bárðar saga Snæfellsás*, *Bolla þátr* and *Laxdæla saga*. *Landnámabók* states that

*Hjalti son Þórðar skálps kom til Íslands ok nam Hjaltadal [...] hans synir váru þeir Þorvaldr ok Þórðr, ágætir menn. Þat hefir erfi verit ágætast á Íslandi, er þeir erfðu fǫður sinn, ok váru þar tólf hundruð boðsmanna, ok váru allir virðingamenn með gjǫfum brutt leiddir*⁸¹⁹

(Hjalti, son of Þórðr skálp, came to Iceland and settled in Hjaltadal [...] his sons were Þorvaldr and Þórðr, renowned men. The most renowned *erfi* in Iceland was that which they offered for their father; it was attended by twelve hundred⁸²⁰ guests, and all the men of distinction were offered departure gifts.)

⁸¹⁵ *Laxd* XXVI, p. 73.

⁸¹⁶ *Laxd* XXVII, pp. 74-75

⁸¹⁷ That is actually 1080 guests.

⁸¹⁸ The role of feasts and alcohol as a means to increase someone’s power will be studied in Chapters 6 and 7.

⁸¹⁹ *Ldn*, p. 238.

⁸²⁰ That is 1440 guests.

The rest of the sources for this *erfi*, which are most probably based on *Landnámabók*, report this *erfi* also very briefly and in almost the same wording as the one in the quote.⁸²¹ In any case, organizing a feast at which over twelve hundred guests⁸²² attended must have taken quite a long time, and this *erfi* was most probably not celebrated immediately after the death of Hjalti but when the conditions were better for men to travel to it and when the heirs had enough time to gather enough provisions to entertain such a large gathering.

The longer the wait between the moment of death and the celebration of the *erfi*, the better the opportunities to organize a better feast and assure a larger attendance to it and thus grant a greater honour to the heirs. Regardless of the cost of these feasts, which must have been enormous, we must note that the honour gained from the feast was for the heirs and not for the deceased. From these examples we can gather that the main purpose of the feast was not to honour the deceased (who had already been buried long before the feast took place) or to facilitate the deceased's transition to the otherworld. Otherwise the feasts would have been celebrated as soon as possible after the death in order to grant a quick adjustment of the dead to their new status.⁸²³ The *erfi* seems to have been intended as a ritual of transition for the living. It was a feast to celebrate the newly acquired status of the heir, and many sagas attest to this succession, which did not take place at the funeral but at the *erfi*. For example, in *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, we are told that during spring the after the death of King Hringr, King Ingjaldr sends messengers to invite King Hrólfr to attend the *erfi* in honour of King Hringr. After a long journey Hrólfr finally arrives in Denmark, where the *erfi* is to take place. When he

⁸²¹ *Bárð* XXII, 171; *Laxd* XXVII, 74 and; *Boll* LXXIX, 232.

⁸²² That is over 1440 guests.

⁸²³ The texts do not comment about a period of exclusion for the bereaved between death-burial and *erfi*. For the avatars of the deceased on their journey to the otherworld see Fernando Guerrero, 'Stranded in Miðgarðr; *Draugar* Folklore in Old Norse Sources' (unpublished master of philosophy thesis, Centre for Viking and Medieval Studies, University of Oslo, 2003).

arrives to the hall “*Drukku þeir nú allir samt með miklum veg erfi Hrings konungs*”⁸²⁴ (They all drank [celebrated] together in grand style the *erfi* of King Hringr.) and the actual succession comes after the drinking has taken place. Then “*Á því þingi er tekinn Ingjaldr til konungs eftir föður sinn yfir Danmörk alla. Sittr hann nú ok semr ríki sitt á þá lund, sem Hrólfr konungr gaf ráð til.*”⁸²⁵ (They have a meeting where Ingjaldr is made king of all Denmark after his father. Now he sits and rules his kingdom in the way in which king Hrólfr advised him to.) As we can see, the actual succession to the throne takes place not immediately after the death of a king, but when the circumstances allow the presence of worthy guests that would add to the honour of the new king. This, of course, does not imply that the heir to the throne did not start ruling immediately after the death of his father. He must have exercised his rank and power from the very beginning; however it was at the *erfi*, following the ritual in front of numerous and relevant witnesses, that his power became legitimate.

The literary corpus often presents the *erfi* taking place long after the actual burial due to the need to arrange a proper feast that would be large enough to honour the heir and, perhaps, the deceased. But was this really the case? As we have seen, the tradition of celebrating *erfi* is referred to in the sagas as an ancient pagan custom and definitely not in vogue during the period in which the sagas were committed to parchment. Is it possible, then, that the *erfi* had a further purpose than offering a feast in which the heir got access to his new rank, surrounded by an atmosphere in which he could display and legitimate his newly acquired wealth and power? Bertram S. Puckle argues that “much as it may have been contributed to the continuation of the usage, hospitality was certainly not the origin of the funeral feast. The special object of the gathering was largely for the purpose of offering prayers for the soul, in the actual

⁸²⁴ *HG XV*, p. 105.

⁸²⁵ *HG XV*, pp. 104-05.

presence of the body, till the burial.”⁸²⁶ We don’t know much about the actual religious practices of the Norse, but we know that the literary sources do not preserve any reference to praying. Also, we know that the *erfi* was celebrated long after the burial, so its main purpose might not have been to pray for the soul of the deceased while the body was disposed of.⁸²⁷ The main questions that remain are “Why was the *erfi* celebrated so long after the burial or cremation?” and “What is the symbolism of the act of drinking the *bragafull* before the change of status?” None of these questions seem to have a clear answer, and in many cases the *erfi* scenes raise more questions than they answer. However, the importance of drinking might explain why “the custom of funerary drinking is much more pronounced in Old Norse texts [than in Anglo-Saxon texts], which are, of course, from a later period.”⁸²⁸

Regarding the first question, it is possible that the long period that the heir had to wait between the death and the feast in which he was acknowledged as the legitimate successor corresponded to the same length of exclusion or mourning period the heir had to go through. Thus, the explanation might correspond more to a ritual practice than to the social prestige portrayed in the literature. We must concede that in a society like that of the Viking period news took a long time to travel, and in order to have the right number and quality of guests, people would have to wait until the news of the death arrived at the right places and for the guests to prepare to engage in a long journey. It was necessary, also, to wait for the right time of the year in which potential guests could

⁸²⁶ Bertram S. Puckle, *Funeral Customs: Their Origin and Development* (London: the author, 1926; repr. Detroit: Omnigraphics, 1990), pp. 102-03.

⁸²⁷ In the ninth century Wulfstan described a funeral feast in Eastern Europe in the following terms: “There is a custom among the Este that after a man’s death he lies indoors uncremated among his relatives and friends for a month, sometimes two. The kings and other high-ranking men remain uncremated sometimes for half a year – the more wealth they have the longer they lie above ground in their houses. All the time that the corpse lies indoors it is the custom for there to be drinking and gambling until the day on which they cremate it.” (‘Wulfstans Account’, ed. by Lund, trans. by Fell, pp. 23-24.) Even though the location of this account escapes the geographical scope of this study, it is interesting to note that ‘the more wealth they have the longer they lie above ground’ perhaps in order to allow more time to prepare the succession and grant a larger attendance to the funeral. Also, in this case, the funeral feast precedes the funeral.

⁸²⁸ Lee, pp. 122-23.

travel. But archaeological evidence seems to point also towards the fact that the journey to the Otherworld was undertaken by ship, horse or foot, and possibly it was a long journey. Is it possible that the length of time in between the death and the celebration of the *erfi* corresponds to the length of time it took the soul of the deceased to arrive in the otherworld? We know, for instance, that among the Lapps “some believed that the journey [to the otherworld] lasted three weeks, while others said three years.”⁸²⁹ If this was the case also among the Norse, it would explain the actual change of status taking place such a long time after the moment of death as the period of exclusion of the heir. Thus, the interval between death and transference of power to the heir would correspond to length of time required by the soul of the deceased to conclude his journey to the Otherworld. In the meanwhile, the heir would assume the role but not the status of his predecessor. If such was the case, then the *erfi* would be a feast to celebrate the arrival of the departed to the otherworld, and thus, once he had fully departed this realm, the heir was able to assume his new rank and claim his inheritance.

Drinking the *bragafull* would then be the first toast that the heir makes after or while assuming his new rank. Actually, it seems that this is indeed the first thing he does once his new status has been acknowledged. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the *bragafull* was ‘the toast of kings’ and it does not seem to have been drunk only at funeral feasts, but in general, it was drunk on occasions in which the king was to be honoured. However, the explanation for the urgency and the symbolism of the toast does not seem to lie in a probable period of exclusion for the bereaved in which the ingestion of alcohol was forbidden. The act of drinking at this ceremony seems to be linked more to the role of the leader as the master of the hall and provider of drinks than to the completion of a bereavement process. After all, one of the most important roles of the leader was that of provider of alcoholic beverages and feasts. The offering of rather

⁸²⁹ van Gennep, p.154.

expensive alcoholic beverages, as a part of the gift-giving culture, aided leaders to gain and retain their power and prestige.⁸³⁰

There need be no real conflict between the meanings of festive group and warrior retinue since the *comitatus* which Tacitus describes also does a double-duty; in time of war it serves the leader in the field and in time of peace it serves him in the hall where most effort is expended in getting drunk and in staying drunk for as long as possible⁸³¹

In this case, the description of the Germans by Tacitus seems to fit very well with what we learn about the Norse in the saga corpus. Enright also states that the Germans chose their kings during feasts⁸³² probably undergoing a similar ritual drinking. The function of the *bragafull*, offered by a lady to the new king might be that of creating bonds. His people might have been offering the new leader the gift of drink, which he would compensate much more lavishly during the many feasts that he was expected to host during his rule.

Another possible explanation is that the act of drinking together was a way of creating bonds and reaffirming friendship.⁸³³ So, this first drink of the leader in front of his people would have been considered as the way in which he created a new liaison with his followers. Therefore, the fact that he drank the *bragafull*, reserved for kings, could be a symbolic acceptance of power and by doing so he accepts the responsibilities a leader has towards his people. He is allowed to sit on the high-seat only when these duties are accepted through the act of drinking.

Snorri tells us that the heir sat in front of the high-seat until the *bragafull* was brought in, then the heir stood up and fetched the vessel and quaffed it as part of the ritual. However Snorri omitted the detail of who the drink bearer was. In an act as symbolic as the enthronement of the heir to the high-seat the gender or rank of the bearer must have been of great importance. "The completed cup-offering among the Germans signifies the sealing of a contract between lord and man but it is ambiguous in

⁸³⁰ This will be studied in Chapter 6.

⁸³¹ Enright, p. 72.

⁸³² Enright, p. 94.

⁸³³ This will be studied Chapter 6.

that same rite, when the presentation is by an unmarried woman, can also create marriage.”⁸³⁴ So, in the case that the cup-bearer was a man, we would expect him to be of high rank and at the same time representative of the community, in whose name he would seal a bond with the leader. But, if it was a woman, would we expect an *erfi* and a wedding feast to be celebrated together?

As matter of fact, in the literature the accession of the heir to the throne and to his inheritance is sometimes accompanied by a further ritual of transition, that is, a wedding to be celebrated at the same time as the *erfi*. There are three instances of a wedding being celebrated together with an *erfi* in the *Fornaldar sǫgur* and they seem to suggest that this was perceived as customary when the king died without a male heir or without a male heir old enough to take over the throne. An illustrative case is that provided in *Qrvar-Odds saga*. In it, after a long journey Qrvar-Oddr returns to Greece and finds that his friend, King Herraudr has died and been buried in a mound long ago. Following his return

*Oddr lét þegar at erfi fá, er hann kom í land, ok er þat var búit, þá fastnar Hárekr Oddi fóstarmey sína, Silkisif, ok er nú allt senn, at menn drekka brullaupit ok erfit eftir Herraud konung. Ok á þessi veizlu var Oddi konungsnafn gefit, ok stýrir hann nú ríki sínu.*⁸³⁵

(Oddr had an *erfi* arranged when he had landed, and when that was ready then Hárekr betrothed his foster-daughter, Silkisif, to Oddr, and now at the same time men celebrated the wedding and the *erfi* in honour of King Herraudr. And at this feast Oddr was given the title of king, and now he ruled his kingdom.)

Silkisif, Qrvar-Oddr’s wife, was, as it might be presumed, King Herraudr’s only heir, and most probably the king had arranged for her to marry Qrvar-Oddr upon his return. Even though Qrvar-Oddr was not a direct heir to the throne, he must have been aware of the fact that he was expected to marry the king’s daughter, thus his relative rush in arranging the *erfi* and completing the rite of passage to become king and fill the power gap that had been left after the king’s death. As Snorri tells us, it is the duty of the heir

⁸³⁴ Enright, p. 83.

⁸³⁵ *Qrv* XXIX, pp. 332-33.

to organize the *erfi* and Qrvar-Oddr, most probably knowing that he was the successor, takes responsibility of arranging the feast. Yet, he could not become a legitimate heir without his marriage. Thus, it is at the same feast that all the requisites for his accession to the throne are fulfilled and wedding and *erfi* are celebrated together.

Gqngu-Hrólf's saga relates a similar story. In it Hrólfr Sturlaugsson returns to Denmark and finds that his friend the king has died, leaving only a female heir Ingigerðr. When he arrives she has an announcement to make: “*Sagði Ingigerðr nú einarðliga, at hún vildi engan mann eiga nema Hrólfr Sturlaugsson*”⁸³⁶ (Ingigerðr announced heartily that she would not marry any other man but Hrólfr Sturlaugsson.) Then something rather unusual happens. “*Gerði Björn þeim nú sæmiliga veizlu, ok drukku erfi Þorgnýs jarls.*”⁸³⁷ (Björn prepared a honourable feast and they celebrated an *erfi* in honour of Earl Þorgný.) What is unusual in this feast is not the celebration of a marriage and an *erfi* on the same occasion but that this is the only instance in which the *erfi* is not organized by the heir. It might be because it was originally intended as a wedding feast and ended up becoming an *erfi* due to the unexpected death of the king. However, most probably both marriage and death were expected to be celebrated on the same occasion.

Similarly, *Friðþjófs saga ins frækna* tells about King Hringr, who falls ill, and being aware of his imminent death and of the fact that his sons are still too young to rule the kingdom, decides to hand the kingdom to his friend Friðþjófr and to give him the hand of his daughter. Without having any previous reference to marriage, as soon as the king dies Friðþjófr celebrates his wedding together with the *erfi*: “*Síðan andaðist konungr, en Friðþjófr gerði brúðhlaup sitt, ok var þá drukkit erfi eftir konunginn. Síðan settist hann at landráðum*”⁸³⁸ (Then the king died, and Friðþjófr celebrated his

⁸³⁶ *GHr* XXXIV, p. 267.

⁸³⁷ *GHr* XXXIV, p. 267.

⁸³⁸ *Frið* V, pp. 102-03.

wedding, and then they celebrated an *erfi* in the honour of the king. Afterwards he started to rule the land.)

These sources do not tell us either who the drink-bearer was during the *erfi*. Should we expect it to be the female heir and bride-to-be? The texts do not provide us with any clues as to answer this question. The only instance in which a woman is said to be the drink-bearer occurs in *Vqlsunga saga* after the death of Queen Borghildr's brother. In the saga we are told that "*Hún gerir nú erfi bróður síns með ráði konungs, [...] Borghildr bar mönnum drykk. Hún kemr fyrir Sinfjötla með miklu horni.*"⁸³⁹ (She arranged her brother's *erfi* with the consent of the king [...] Borghildr herself brought the drinks to the men. She came to Sinfjötli with a large drinking horn.) However, in this *erfi* there no issue of succession or marriage, and it is stressed that the queen herself brought the drinks as part of a plot to poison Sinfjötli. This episode seems to represent, then, a feast for honouring the dead by taking revenge upon his slayer. But, again, this is the only example of an explicit female cup-bearer at an *erfi*. In general, it is possible to see that in all the previous instances the wedding was motivated by the possibility of having a power void due to the absence of a male heir to the throne and by the need to fill this void.

In the *Íslendinga sǫgur* there is only one example of *erfi* as an inheritance feast associated with a wedding. This occurs in *Laxdóla saga*, which tells of the *erfi* of Unnr Ketilsdóttir, one of the first settlers of Iceland. This feast, apparently organized by Unnr before her death, may illustrate what was expected to take place at an *erfi* in which the transmission of authority and goods were the main objective. The saga relates that Unnr was fonder of her grandson Óláfr feilan than of anyone else and so "*lýsti því fyrir mǫnnum, at hon ætlaði Óláfi allar eignir eptir sinn dag í Hvammi.*"⁸⁴⁰ (she declared in front of every one that she intended to leave all her possessions in Hvammr to Óláfr

⁸³⁹ *Vqls* X, p. 133.

⁸⁴⁰ *Laxd* VII, p. 11.

when she died.) When Unnr feels that age is overcoming her, she then arranges Óláfr's wedding and invites a large number of prominent people, as she knows that she will soon die; "*ek ætla þessa veizlu síðast at búa.*"⁸⁴¹ (I think this is the last feast I will hold.) The day of the wedding feast Unnr enters the hall when all the guests have arrived and makes a speech concerning her last will: "*Björn kveð ek at þessu, bróður minn, ok Helga ok aðra frændr mína ok vini; bólstað þenna með slikum búnaði, sem nú megu þér sjá, sel ek í hendr Óláfi, frænda mínum, til eignar ok forráða.*"⁸⁴² (Björn my brother, and Helgi and all my other relatives and friends I call your attention on this; I hand this homestead and all the goods which you can see to the ownership and management of Óláfr, my kinsman.) Death forebodings seldom prove to be wrong in the Icelandic sagas and, accordingly, after uttering these words Unnr goes to her bedchamber and dies in the course of the night. The next morning when her body is found the festivities continue, but now "*Var nú drukkit allt saman, brullaup Óláfs ok erfi Unnar.*"⁸⁴³ (Now both Ólaf's wedding and Unnr's *erfi* were celebrated together.) Unnr is then buried on the last day of the feast, which is an exceptional occurrence for, as we have seen, other *erfi* are celebrated after the burial has taken place; though in this case the burial had to take place afterwards due to the particularities of the moment of death, in the middle of a celebration. It seems that Unnr arranged the wedding feast in order to celebrate her *erfi*;⁸⁴⁴ at least the only speech she makes during the whole episode seems to point towards this. As we learn from the saga, Unnr was a rather wealthy person, and this episode may narrate what would have been considered as an ideal *erfi*. That is, one in which the person manages to state his or her last will in front of a large number of

⁸⁴¹ *Laxd VII*, p. 11.

⁸⁴² *Laxd VII*, p. 12.

⁸⁴³ *Laxd VII*, p. 13.

⁸⁴⁴ In *Landnamabók*, most probably the author's source for this episode, Unnr is called Auðr, and the events concerning her death and *erfi* are narrated in a similar fashion: "*en er þrjár nætr hafði veizlan staðit, þá valði hún gjafir vinum sínum ok réð þeim heilræði; sagði hon, at þá skyldi standa veizlan enn þrjár nætr; hon kvað þat vera skyldu erfi sitt.*" (*Ldn* p. 146) (and when the feast had gone for three days, then she gave presents to her friends and gave them wise counsels; she said that they should continue the feast for three nights more; she said that this should be her *erfi*).

people before dying, thus avoiding the many problems that might have originated concerning the inheritance and succession of a wealthy and powerful person.

In all the previous instances we have seen that the actual purpose of the *erfi* seems to have been to honour the heir and legitimate his new position and not to honour the deceased. This kind of celebration does not appear to be exclusive to Old Norse society. In England, for example, as late as the nineteenth century:

The funeral repast was at one time known as the 'averil' at which a special form of crisp bread or cake and ale was provided [...] The word averil or arvel means 'heir ale' or succession ale, from which we see that the feast was once considered not so much as a commemoration of the dead but as a banquet to welcome the new heir to the title or property.⁸⁴⁵

As we have seen, there is no clear reason for the *erfi* to take place long after the death. One possibility is that the span of time between the moment of death and the accession of the heir to his new position is in agreement with the time it took for the soul of the dead to arrive at the otherworld. Once it had fully departed this realm the heir could claim the goods and title of his predecessor. The ritual drinking before the inheritor could access the high seat can be interpreted as a form of creating a bond with his followers. In general, we can see that the *erfi* was a feast to celebrate the continuation of life, and maybe, the end of a period of mourning.

5.2.2- THE *ERFI* AS A FEAST TO HONOUR THE DECEASED

Only in a few instances does the *erfi* appear to be conducted with the main purpose of honouring the dead. However, in most of these cases it is difficult to establish if the intention was indeed to honour the dead instead of the heir as the sagas refer to the feasts with standard phrases just mentioning that an *erfi* was celebrated in someone's memory. "*Var hann út leiddr at þeim sið, sem þá var, ok drukkit eptir hann erfi*"⁸⁴⁶ (He was buried according to the custom of the time and an *erfi* was drunk in his

⁸⁴⁵ Puckle, p. 104.

⁸⁴⁶ *Kjaln* XVII, p. 41.

honour) is the regular way in which most *erfi* are described, without any further reference to the event.⁸⁴⁷ In other instances we are only told that an *erfi* was organized in someone's honour and that the heir(s) had organized it.⁸⁴⁸ Even if these sources explicitly state that the *erfi* is to be celebrated in honour of the dead we cannot take for granted that that was the case. First of all, the lack of description of the actual feast does not allow an insight into whether or not the *erfi* was indeed mainly celebrated for honouring the deceased. Second, and most important, as we have seen, there seems to be a formulaic tradition in the way the *erfi* are referred to. In the previous section, where the main purpose of the *erfi* appears to be that of a succession feast, the same formula is used, even if honouring the dead was not the main reason for the celebration.

This leaves us, then, with just a few cases in which the main purpose of the feast was the actual honouring of the departed; namely, *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*: two sources of different nature. In *Eyrbyggja saga*, Þóroddr and a group of men drown while fishing. When their relatives hear the news “*buðu þau Kjartan ok Þuríðr nábuúum sínum þangat til erfis; var þá tekit jólaql þeirra ok snúit til erfisins.*”⁸⁴⁹ (Kjartan and Þuríðr invited their neighbours to the *erfi*, their Yule-ql⁸⁵⁰ was then taken and used for the *erfi*.) On the first night of the *erfi* Þóroddr and all the other drowned men's ghosts show up to the feast:

⁸⁴⁷ A few examples are: “*Síðan fara þeir heim, ok er þá drukkit erfi eptir Vésteinn. Or er þat er gqrt, fer hveir heim til síns heimilis*” (*Gisl* XIV, p. 49) (Afterwards they go home and then an *erfi* is drunk in honour of Vésteinn. And when that is done everyone went to his own home); “*Nú er erfi drukkit eptir Þorgrím, ok gefr Bqrkr góðar vingjafar mǫrgum mǫnnum.*” (*Gisl* XVIII, p. 56) (Now an *erfi* is drunk in honour of Þorgrím and Bqrkr gives good gifts of friendship to a large number of men.); “*Þórðr, faðir þeira, sótt ok andaðist, ok var útférð hans veglig ger eptir fornun síð. Ok er erfit var drukkit, fæddi húsfreyja*” (*Þórð* I, p. 164) (Þórðr, their father, became sick and died, and his funeral was carried splendidly according to the old custom. And when the *erfi* had been celebrated Þórðr's wife gave birth.)

⁸⁴⁸ A few examples are: “*Veizlu hefi ek þar stofnaða, ok ætla ek at drekka erfi eptir fqður minn*” (*Nj* CVIII, p. 276) (I have prepared a feast, and I intend to drink *erfi* in honour of my father); “*Þat verðr nú næst til tíðinda, at Gisl skeiðarnef tók sótt ok andaðist, en mágar Þóris buðu honum til erfis.*” (*Gullþ* XV, p. 209) (The was the next thing that happened, that Gisl Skeiðarnef became sick and died and Þóris brother in law invited him to the *erfi*.); “*Eptir andlát Þorsteins lét Karl gera mikla veizlu á Grund ok bauð til Hávarði ok sonum hans ok qlum vinum sínum innan dals.*” (*Svarfd* XIX, 183-84) (After Þorstein's death Karl prepared a large feast at Grund and invited Havarðr and his son as well as all his friends in the valley).

⁸⁴⁹ *Eb* LIV, p. 148.

⁸⁵⁰ *Jólaql* (Yule-ql) will be discussed in the next section, where seasonal feasts are analyzed.

Menn fagnuðu vel Þóroddi, því at þetta þótti góðr fyrirburðr, því at þá hqfðu menn þat fyrir satt, at þá væri mǫnnum vel fagnat at Ránar, ef sæðauðir menn vitjuðu erfis síns; en þá var enn litt af numin forneskjan, þó at menn væri skirðir ok kristnir at kalla.”⁸⁵¹

(The people welcomed Þóroddr since they thought it was a good omen because it was an old belief that men had been well received by Rán⁸⁵² if the drowned attended their own *erfi*; there was still a small degree of belief in the old lore even if the people had been baptized and called themselves Christians.)

However, the ghosts do not disappear once the *erfi* has concluded and the story of a good omen turns into a massive haunting.

What makes me believe that this might have been an *erfi* to honour the dead more than an actual succession feast is the fact that the feast is organized almost immediately after the news of the drowning become known. So, without having time to organize it properly, the heir takes whatever *q!* there is at hand to celebrate the feast. Also, it seems that the central element of the celebration is the dead, and the beliefs about their entrance to the otherworld. Furthermore if there are elements concerning the succession of Kjartan they are not mentioned at all, though this might be due to the fact that the central incident of the episode is actually the haunting and not the *erfi*. What is striking in this occurrence is the fact that the *erfi* was celebrated almost immediately after the death of the fishermen. Was this because there were no important succession issues to resolve? After all Þóroddr was not a *goði*. Or is it possible that since men who drowned at sea were believed to go and dwell with Rán, in the sea, their journey to the otherworld was believed to be shorter, thus the *erfi* could be celebrated soon after death?

In *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* King Heiðrek is slain and no one knows who has committed the deed, so that his death goes unavenged. We are told that succession takes place, and his son Angantýr takes the title of king and claims his inheritance:

Þá lét Angantýr, sonr Heiðreks konungs, kveðja þings, ok á því þingi var hann til konungs tekinn yfir öll þau ríki, er Heiðrekr konungur hafði

⁸⁵¹ *Eb* LIV, p. 148.

⁸⁵² Rán was the goddess of the sea.

átt. Á þessu þingi strengdi hann heit, at aldri skyldi hann fyrr setjast í háseti föður síns en hann hefði hefnt hans.”⁸⁵³

(Then Angantýr, the son of King Heiðrekr, summoned an assembly, and at that assembly he was taken as a king over all the land which King Heiðrekr had owned. At this assembly he made an oath; that he should never sit on his father’s high-seat until he had avenged him.)

This episode has all the characteristics of an *erfi*: the heir summons an assembly to witness his succession, rank and inheritance are handed to him, and finally he makes an oath. The only thing that remains pending is the actual *erfi*. But this takes place a short time after the succession assembly, when Angantýr discovers his father’s slayers and avenges him. Only then “*lætr Angantýr gera veizlu mikla á Danparstöðum á þeim bæ, er Árheimar heita, at erfa föður sinn*”⁸⁵⁴ (Angantýr arranges a large feast to hold an *erfi* in honour of his father in at place called Árheim, in Danparstaðir, where he lived) and, of course he then sits on the high-seat. Since all the succession issues had already been resolved during a previous assembly, the main purpose of this *erfi* must have been to honour King Heiðrek.

In this case the succession and *erfi* ceremonies take place on different occasions, and the high-seat seems to be central to understanding the fact. In a previous work I have discussed the possibility of an actual belief that the souls of those whose deaths remained unavenged could not reach the otherworld.⁸⁵⁵ If this was the case, it would explain the *erfi* as a feast to commemorate the arrival of the soul to the otherworld. Hence, the heir would only receive possession of rank, inheritance and high-seat once his predecessor had fully departed this world. Two people could not hold the same rank and occupy the same high-seat. In the case of Angantýr, he was to hold the rank and possessions as his father’s murder had little hopes of being avenged. However, he refused to occupy the same high-seat, for his father had not fully departed this world. Only when he is sure that Heiðrek’s soul has left this world he does occupy the

⁸⁵³ *Heiðr* XI, p. 51.

⁸⁵⁴ *Heiðr* XI, p. 52.

⁸⁵⁵ See Guerrero, *Stranded*, pp. 38-57.

symbolic seat. If my assumptions are correct, then one could perceive this *erfi* as a feast to celebrate Heiðrek's departure: the king has finally gone to the otherworld.

It seems, then, that *erfi* actually had a twofold purpose. First, its role was to celebrate the end of the soul's journey to the otherworld, which seems to have been a rather lengthy one. Second, and most important, was the celebration of the continuation of life and the symbolic transition of the heir to his new rank.

5.2.2- OTHER EVIDENCE FROM COMPOUND WORDS

There are two synonymous compound words related to *erfi*, these are *erfidrápa*⁸⁵⁶ [*erfi*-poem⁸⁵⁷] and *erfíkvæði*⁸⁵⁸ [*erfi*-poem] that might cast some light on what went on at the *erfi*. Perhaps the most famous of these is *Sonatorrek*, an *erfíkvæði* composed by Egill Skalla-Grímsson in honour of his son Bǫðvarr. Egill's daughter offers to carve it in runes as Egill recites it; once this is done they intend to let themselves die of grief for Bǫðvarr's death. Egill's daughter's argument for composing this poem is that "*Seint ætla ek Þorstein son þinn yrkja kvæðit eptir Bǫðvar, en þat hlýðir eigi, at hann sé eigi erfður, því at eigi ætla ek okkur sitja at drykkjunni þeirri, at hann er erfður*"⁸⁵⁹ (I don't think that your son Þorsteinn will compose a poem in honour of Bǫðvarr, and that is not proper, that he does pay attention to the *erfi*, because I don't intend for us to be sitting there drinking when he is given an *erfi*.) From this example we can see that it might have been expected to have funeral poems recited in the memory of the dead while people sat at the drinking benches.

⁸⁵⁶ This term appears only in 6 different occasions in the literary corpus: *Laxd* LXXVIII, p. 229; *GrXXV*, p. 89; *Fbr* III, p. 130 and V, p. 139 and; *ÓH* CL, p. 281 and CCXII, p. 366. (See *ÓrðT*, *erfidrápa*)

⁸⁵⁷ The *drápa* is a heroic poem. For more information on this poetic genre see Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas: Iceland's Medieval Literature*, trans. by Peter Foote, 3rd edn (Reykjavik: Hið Íslenska Bókmenntafélag, 1997), pp. 90-111.

⁸⁵⁸ This term occurs only in *Eg* LXXIX, p. 245. (See *ÓrðT*, *erfíkvæði*)

⁸⁵⁹ *Eg* LXXVIII, p. 245.

The rest of the references to *erfi* poems do not attest the place or occasion where they were recited. But perhaps the fact that they are named *erfidrápa* implies that they were poems to be recited during the *erfi*, in honour of the dead.

In general we have seen that the main purpose of the *erfi* seems to have been celebrating the succession of the heir to his new rank. Only a few instances make reference to an *erfi* actually being celebrated to honour the dead. It seems reasonable to assume that these feasts were celebrated after a certain period of time, which corresponded to the amount of time required by the soul to arrive to the otherworld, a period that the heir utilized to arrange a proper feast at which guests of high rank would attest and legitimate his accession to power. These feasts are said to last three days, and included ritual drinking and swearing of oaths on the part of the heir, most probably as a way to create a bond with his followers. The fact that all these celebrations occur among high-ranking men might imply that their main purpose was to legitimate the transfer power and status to the heir, which was not only unnecessary but also unaffordable to the lower strata of society. There also seems to be a formulaic tradition for referring to *erfi*, expressed by the words *drekka erfi eptir* (celebrate an *erfi* in honour of) and in most cases it is referred to as an ancient custom, no longer extant at the time the sagas were written.

5.3- SEASONAL FEASTS

Apart from wedding and funeral feasts the other major feasting occasions mentioned in the sources are seasonal feasts. Those which are most commonly mentioned in the literary corpus are *Jól*, the *vetrnætr* (winter nights) and, to a lesser extent, the *sumarnætr* (summer nights) or *sumarmál* (summer meal). These were celebrated at fixed times of the year; that is, mid-winter, the beginning of winter and

mid summer, respectively. Alcohol consumption seems to have played a central role in these festivities, which were of a religious nature. As Igor de Garine puts it:

Drinks are a means of establishing and maintaining contact with human and also supernatural powers [...] In many religious and magical rituals, liquid offerings are made to the supernatural powers. They consist of natural drinks - water, milk, blood, beer and wine - and more recently spirits.⁸⁶⁰

These feasts were celebrated at crucial times of the year, either when travelling and farming activities ceased or began due to the change in the climate conditions as well as to the reduction or increase of the day-time. At these points of the year friendship and communion with the gods might have been sought, and a way of renewing the bonds with the gods might have been both through sacrifices and communal drinking.⁸⁶¹ Thus, in this section I will analyze the role that alcoholic beverages might have played at such festivities. The *vetrnætr* and *sumarnætr*, as we have seen, were mostly the seasons in which there was a surplus, and thus they were mostly combined with other festivities such as weddings and funeral feasts. They were the proper moment to host a feast due both to the decrease in farming activities combined with the need to ‘dispose’ of all the extra stock that could not be kept throughout the winter.

The other main seasonal feast was *Jól*. The Old Norse term *Jól* can be rendered into English as Yule or Christmas and it was a fortnight-long celebration that took place in midwinter. The etymology of the word itself is not free of debate. *Ágrip af Nóregskonungasögum*, written in the late thirteenth century, records what might be the earliest attempt to clear the origin of the word *Jól*. Its author tells that

En hér hæfir at skýra spurdaga þann er kristnir men gera, hvat heiðnir menn myndu til jóla vita, með því at jól var eru risin af burð dróttins várs. Heiðnir men gerðu sér samkundu ok í tign við Óðin, en Óðinn heitir mǫrgum nafnum. Hann heitir Viðrir ok hann heitir Hǫr ok Friði ok Jólnir, ok var af Jólni jól kalluð.⁸⁶²

⁸⁶⁰ Igor de Garine, ‘For a Pluridisciplinary Approach to Drinking’, in *Drinking: Anthropological Approaches*, ed. by Igor de Garine and others (Oxford: Bergam Books, 2001), pp. 1-10 (pp. 6-7).

⁸⁶¹ As we will see in Chapter 6 communal drinking was a way of reaffirming and strengthening the bonds between fellow drinkers.

⁸⁶² *Ágr* I, p. 2.

(And here it is proper to solve the question which Christian men pose, [about] what heathen men understood by *Jól*, because our *Jól* has its origin in the birth of Our Lord. Heathen men organized a banquet at which they honoured Óðinn, and Óðinn is called by many names. He is called Viðrir and he is called Hqr and Þriði and Jólnir, and it was after Jólnir that *Jól* was named.)

Thus, it is probable that in the thirteenth century *Jól* was perceived as a feast in honour of Óðinn. But plenty other possible etymologies have been put forward ever after. *IEW* associates it with the root *aulos* meaning “grosser dorsch (*gadus callarias*)”⁸⁶³ (a large type of cod) and offers another possible explanation associating the word “*Jól* ‘weihnachten’ und *ýlir* mit *aul-* zu verbinden (*vegetationsgottheit, aul-* ‘stiel der pflanzen *archangelica* und *angelica*)”⁸⁶⁴ (*jól* ‘Christmas’ and *ýlir* to connect [them] with *aul-* ‘angelica silvestris (vegetation-godhead). There have been attempts to relate *jól* to Old Norse *ql*, to Latin *ioculus* (fun), and with the name Julius [Caesar] ⁸⁶⁵ and there is no agreement yet about the origin of the word. *AEW* says that its basic Germanic form is seen in **jehwla* and **jegwla* “*das auf idg. *jeku zuruckweist. Weitere anknüpfungen unsicher*”⁸⁶⁶ (point back to Indo-Germanic **jeku*. Further connections are uncertain).

There were some problems, especially during the conversion period, in differentiating pagan *Jól* and Christian Yule due to the similar time of the year in which they were celebrated. Thus, Snorri tells that Saint Óláfr heard that “*hqfðu fjqlmennt á Mærini ok váru þar blót stór at miðjum vetri, blótuðu þeir þá til friðar ok vetrarfars góðs.*”⁸⁶⁷ (at Mærin there was a large gathering and there were great sacrifices during midwinter, they sacrificed for peace and for a good winter.) When King Óláfr arrives in Mærin to investigate the problem the farmers save themselves by claiming that it was a Christian and not a pagan feast:

Bar konungr þat á hendr bóndum, at þeir hefði haft miðsvetrarblót. Qlvir svarar ok segir, at bændr váru ósannir at þeirri sqk. ‘Hqfðum vér,’ segir hann, ‘jólaboð ok víða í héruðum samdrykkjur. Ætla bændur eigi svá hneppt til jólaveizlu sér, at eigi verði stór afhlaup, ok drukku

⁸⁶³ *IEW, aulos-s.*

⁸⁶⁴ *IEW, jól.*

⁸⁶⁵ See Árni Björnsson, *Jól á Íslandi* (Reykjavík: Ísafoldarprentsmiðja H.F., 1963), p. 23-27.

⁸⁶⁶ *AEW, jól.*

⁸⁶⁷ *ÓH CVIII, p. 178.*

*menn þat, herra, lengi síðan. Er á Mærini mikill hqfuðstaðr ok hús stór, en byggð mikil umhverfis. Þykir mǫnnum þar til gleði gott at drekka mǫrgum saman.*⁸⁶⁸

(The king accused the farmers of having had a midwinter sacrifice. Qlvir answers and says that the farmers were not guilty of that charge. 'We had' says he 'a *Jól* feast and collective drinking far and wide in all the districts. The farmers do not intend to make such scant provisions for their Yule-feast so that there is a great surplus, and the men are drinking that, Lord, for a long time now. There are great chief-places and big houses in Mærin, and many people live in the vicinities. Men think it good entertainment to drink in a large company.)

It is known that Mærin was one of the last Norwegian regions to convert to Christianity. So, if we assume that the farmer Qlvir was actually lying in order to save his head, we might have a good description of what a *Jól* feast consisted in, or at least a thirteenth-century perception of what these feasts consisted in. For what we can gather from this description, it seems that the *Jól* feast was mainly a drinking gathering and that it took place shortly after the Christian Yule, hence the excuse that the gathering is nothing else but the continuation of the Christian feast.

The literary sources, however, seem to have a rather biased perception of the pagan *Jóla blóta*, or Yule sacrifices. On some occasions we hear that as late as the thirteenth century someone "*hafði um vetrin jóladrykki eftir norrænum sið*"⁸⁶⁹ (had during the winter a Jule-drinking according to the [Old] Norse tradition) but we are not told what this consisted of. However, some of the *Fornaldar sqgur* give us at least an impression of how thirteenth-century Icelanders imagined this feast. Thus, *Bósa saga ok Herauðs* says that a *Jól* feast was celebrated in the following fashion:

Ok sem inn kom þat minni, sem signat var Þór, þá skipti Sigurðr um slagina, ok tók þá at ókyrrast allt þat, sem laust var, hnifar ok borðdiskar ok allt þat, sem engi helt á, ok fjöldi manna stukku upp ór sinum sætum ok léku á gólfinu, ok gekk þetta langa stund. Því næst kom þat minni inn, er helgat var öllum Ásum. Sigurðr skipti þá enn um slagina ok stillti þá svá hátt, at dvergmála kvað í höllunni. Stóðu þá upp allir þeir, sem inni váru, nema brúðguminn ok brúðrin ok konungrinn, ok var nú allt á ferð ok för innan um alla höllina, ok gekk því langa stund. [...] Því næst kom inn Óðins minni. Þá lauk Sigurðr upp hörpunni. Hún var svá stór, at maðr mátti standa réttir í maganum á henni; hún var öll sem á gull sæi. Þar tók hann upp hvíta glófa gullsauaða. Hann sló nú þann slag, sem Faldafeykir heitir, ok stukku þá faldarnir af konunum, ok léku þeir fyrir ofan þvertréin. Stukku þá upp konurnar ok allir menninir, ok engi hlutr

⁸⁶⁸ ÓH CVIII, p. 179.

⁸⁶⁹ Ísl LX, p. 315.

*var þá sá, at kyrr þoldi. En er þetta minni var af gengit, kom inn þat minni, er signat var Freyju.*⁸⁷⁰

(When the memorial cup consecrated to Þórr was carried into the hall Sigurðr changed the tune. Then everything began to move, knives, plates and anything else which no one was holding on to- and lots of people jumped up from their seats and danced on the floor. This went on for quite some time. [...]and after that it was time for Óðinn's toast to be drunk. Then Sigurðr opened the harp. It was heavily inlaid in gold, and so big that a man could stand upright inside it. From inside he took a pair of white gloves, gold embroidered, and played the 'coif-thrower'. Then all the coifs were blown off the ladies, and danced above the crossbeams in the hall. All the men and women jumped to their feet, and nothing remained still in its place. When Óðinn's toast had been drunk, there was only one more left, the toast to Freyja.)⁸⁷¹

In this quotation we can get a clear impression of the way in which thirteenth-century Icelanders perceived the pagan *Jól* celebration. It seems that when the sagas were written down *Jól* was largely misunderstood as a pagan festivity during which anything could happen. It was a seasonal feast that conflicted with one of the major Christian festivities, as thus it was often portrayed as it is in *Bósa saga*, that is, largely as a feast during which the un-Christian powers were set loose.

⁸⁷⁰ *Bós* XII, p. 311-12.

⁸⁷¹ *Bósi and Herraud*, trans. by Hermann Pálsson and others, in *Seven Viking Romances* (London: Penguin, 1985), pp. 199-227 (p. 220).

*Ef þú heyrir heimslig orð
drukkinna manna, deil eigi við
þá, er vindrukknir eru ok tapa viti
sinu. Slikir hlutir verða mörgum
at miklum móðtrega eða bana.⁸⁷²*

In chapter 10 of *Fljótsdæla saga* we are told about Helgi Ásbjarnarson, the son of a rich farmer and a young and prominent man who is acquiring a great deal of popularity in Eastern Iceland. He marries Þórdís, the sister of Bjarni Brodd-Helgason, who is described as *hinn mesti skörungr ok höfðingi mikill* (the most prominent man and a great chieftain). Þórdís is nicknamed Þórdís *todda* (load) because “*hún gaf aldri minna en stóra todda, þá er hún skyldi fátækum gefa, svo var hún örlát*”⁸⁷³ (she never gave less than a large load when she gave to the poor, she was so open-handed). When Helgi and Þórdís have been married for a winter “*þá bað hun Helga selja land þetta, því at hun þóttist eigi halda mega risnu sinni fyrir atkvæmdar sakir – ‘ok vilda ek, at þú keyptir landit í Mjóvanesi, því at mér sýnist þá eigi jafnmjök í garðshliði.*”⁸⁷⁴ (then she asked Helgi to sell the land because she thought she could not keep her hospitality due to all the visitors – ‘and I want you to buy the land at Mjóvanes because I think that not so many people at the gate there.) So the couple moved to Mjóvanes, where Helgi farmed for a long time.

I have chosen this passage to open the penultimate chapter of my thesis because it illustrates several (though not all) of the issues that are the thematic unit of my last two chapters: the relationship between alcohol and power. Here we can see a young and prominent man, the son of a rich farmer, who is rising (or attempting to rise) in the power spheres of tenth-century Iceland. He complies with all the requirements that a

⁸⁷² “If you hear foolish words from drunken men, do not quarrel with those who are drunk on wine and lose their wits. Such things increase the sorrows of many and even lead to death.” (*Vqls XXI*, p. 163.)

⁸⁷³ *Flj X*, p. 239.

⁸⁷⁴ *Flj X*, p. 240.

man at the time needed to gain prominence and maybe become a great leader: he is the son of a rich farmer, he is popular in his district, he marries the sister of a *goði* and he has a large number of visitors to whom his wife (and surely he too) displays great generosity. His wife, Þórdís, is a woman who belongs to an upper-class family, whose household role seems to be that of “bestower of gifts”. Her nickname is explained as based on her generosity to paupers; it seems that one of the roles of women of prominent families was precisely this - to offer gifts to visitors (pauper or not) and thus enhance the reputation of the family. However, something goes wrong in Helgi’s attempt to become a leader of men and he has to quit the power struggle. A symbol of his rising popularity is the large number of visitors that seem to seek him, but his wealth is not enough to cope with that economic burden of displaying generosity to all his guests. Not being a chieftain, he does not have the extra income from taxes that might allow him to be adequately hospitable and increase his power. Helgi’s example may be one of the innumerable failed attempts of many prominent men who were struggling to acquire an influential position in medieval Iceland.

In the following chapters I will study the way in which alcohol was perceived in Norse society and how the ways in which it was displayed, offered and/or consumed helped some men to increase their power over other people. This will be approached from different points of view. Chapter 6 will focus on the ways in which the offering and consumption of alcoholic beverages was used as a way to display power. This will be approached from three different angles., First, I will start by studying the role of alcohol as a part of the Old Norse gift-giving culture and the ways in which alcohol consumption could be interpreted as a symbol of friendship while, on the side of the provider, it was a way of displaying wealth and power –which in turn as a tool to gain friends and influence people. Second, I will study the display of wealth by the use of prestigious or expensive drinking vessels. As we will see, each kind of drinking vessel

had an inherent social status which not only matched the context in which it was used or displayed, but also was in accordance with the value of the drink it contained. Finally, I will study the way in which alcohol consumption was used to enhance and/or display men's power through drinking contests and boasting during toasts, which was, after all, another way of reaffirming someone's superiority. A last way in which alcohol consumption could be used as a way to display power was through seating arrangements in the drinking place. Seating arrangements played an important role in the acknowledgement of men's prestige; but this topic has already been discussed.⁸⁷⁵ Chapter 7 will be devoted to more sinister ways in which alcoholic beverages could be used to acquire power. In it I will study the roles of alcohol and drunkenness as tools to influence men's wills and to betray or attack an enemy. Finally, in Chapter 7 I will also analyze the concoction and role of magic alcoholic beverages, which could be used as a tool to manipulate people's minds.

But, first, let us start with a theoretical overview of how power was perceived in Iceland in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, when most of our primary literary sources were committed to parchment. All of these considerations will be, as expected, taking alcohol and the contexts in which it was consumed as a unifying factor.

The origins of saga literature (as the outcome of an ancient oral tradition or the product of medieval Icelandic fiction-authors containing perhaps a kernel of historical truth) will be considered as irrelevant for the purposes of this study. Regardless of the historical or the literary origins of the saga literature and, regardless of the obsolete (but still current) debate between the Bookprose/Freeprose theories initiated by Heusler in 1914 with his *Die Anfänge der isländischen Saga*, I will approach saga literature as a construct (historical or not) that reflects the contemporary ideology of the period in

⁸⁷⁵ See Chapter 4.4.

which sagas were written.⁸⁷⁶ As ideology I understand the definition of it given by Torfi Tulinius:

the ideology of a society or social group can be defined as the aggregate of representations, values, and hierarchies of value that condition the relationship of the individual to the world in general and society in particular. It might be called the characteristic worldview of a society or social group.⁸⁷⁷

In this sense, ideology, as related to alcohol consumption would represent a conception of the world in which men interact with and perceive each other (as individuals or as part of a society) according to the representations, values and hierarchies that surround the particular context, manner and, intent of alcohol offering and intake. The context of alcohol consumption can be either at a feast or as part of general hospitality, in a public gathering or in private, among friends or enemies and among friends or strangers. The manner in which it is offered and consumed can be in a ritual or non-ritual manner. Finally, alcohol offering can be with the purpose of deceiving or pleasing, of befriending or betraying, of communication or misunderstanding, and of displaying wealth and power. All these topics will, of course, be approached as factors in the quest for power, which is what will occupy us through these last chapters.

Before engaging in the study of these multiple approaches to Old Norse drinking culture we must consider the social relevance of alcohol in this society. As Jón Viðar Sigurðsson explains, in medieval Iceland “The creation and maintenance of friendship was almost always linked to feasts and gifts [...] Those who ate together and drank together, belonged together.”⁸⁷⁸ In this sense, hosting a feast created social bonds, both between the guests themselves as well as between the host and his guests. This bonding could take place at two different levels: social and economic.

⁸⁷⁶ For a discussion about the ongoing debate about freeprose/bookprose debate see Carol Clover, ‘Icelandic Family Sagas (*Íslendingasögur*)’, in *Old-Norse Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*, ed. by Carol Clover and others (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), pp. 239-315 and; Gísli Sigurðsson, *Medieval Icelandic Saga*, pp. 1- 115.

⁸⁷⁷ Tulinius, p. 40.

⁸⁷⁸ Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Chieftains and Power in the Icelandic Commonwealth*, trans. by Jean Lundskær-Nielsen, The Viking Collection, 12 (Odense: Odense University Press, 1999), pp. 126-27.

At the social level, this bond was created partly due to the role of alcohol as a social catalyst. As Igor de Garine puts it,

One might wonder if the temptation to escape the harsh realities of life by using both the energising and soothing properties of alcohol could be considered a feature of many human beings, allowing them to reach a psychological stage in which inhibitions diminish in an amiable and understanding in-group. This might be interpreted as a consequence of the self-consciousness of the human being and his craving to stop it.⁸⁷⁹

Alcoholic drinks can work as a conversation facilitator, a taboo breaker and/or a feud ‘resolver’ or catalyst for they can be an aid to break social inhibitions that might be difficult to discuss when sober.⁸⁸⁰ Apart from working as a communication-enhancing tool, the act of drinking together creates a different kind of bond between companions at table. The community that gathered at the drinking benches, whether they were members of the leader’s retinue or guests at a feast, ideally became a putative family. Not coincidentally, as Enright discusses, the Germanic word *druht* (Old Norse *drótt*) “recognized as the most widespread and most important vernacular name for the *comitatus*”⁸⁸¹ was also used to signify “festive procession” or “wedding procession”. After studying the evidence of the use of this word Enright convincingly argues that both meanings and social practices of *druht* might imply a symbolic act of adoption. Fellow drinkers – members of the lord’s retinue or his guests - are made part of the family by creating a symbolic blood-bond through ritual drinking. “Once made a ‘son’, the new member also becomes the brother of his companions and, as [...] his status and condition is sealed with a ritual drink with his ‘family’. He is doubly bound by the sacred symbols of his new life, by holy bonds of weapons and liquor.”⁸⁸² Creating symbolic family ties with the members of a community was also a protective measure, a means of diminishing the dangers of incorporating a stranger into the household. This

⁸⁷⁹ de Garine, p. 3.

⁸⁸⁰ As the quotation at the beginning of this chapter shows, alcohol can also generate misunderstandings and quarrels, due to its properties as a inhibition breaker.

⁸⁸¹ Enright, p. 71.

⁸⁸² Enright, p. 77.

also increased the leader's or host's power, as it augmented the number of his unconditional supporters and this would, in turn, raise his status.

In this (social) sense, a chieftain or farmer could increase his power by hosting feasts in which alcohol was most probably offered, because the general inebriation or feeling of well-being at a feast helped him create and surround himself with a community centred on his own figure. This community would, then, respond with solidarity to the host and his needs as it would react to the needs of its own family. In other words, feasting created an extended and extensive foster-family; thus, increasing the social and political power of the person who created such a community.

These social contexts in which alcohol served as a social catalyst and as a bond creator, were of special relevance in medieval Iceland. During the Sturlung age, when power started to be concentrated in the hands of a few families, the *stórgoðar* had to surround themselves with a large retinue in order to assure their well-being throughout the power-struggles of the period. And this is, precisely, the same period in which the largest amount of saga literature was committed to parchment. Thus, if literature is a vehicle of ideology, we should expect to see many of the concerns about retinue formation and disintegration reflected in the literature of this period. This might apply to the *Fornaldar sqgur* in particular, since “for political and ideological reasons, this literature [i.e. the *Fornaldar sqgur*] was very useful to the social class in power at this time in Iceland.”⁸⁸³ Tulinius also argues that “if the *fornaldarsaga* was the literary arena in which the ideals that inspired social change were expressed, it was also that in which the ills that plagued Icelandic society were displayed more openly.”⁸⁸⁴ Accordingly, as we will see in the following pages, many of the elements surrounding drinking, the hall and the political uses of alcohol present in the *Sturlunga saga* compilation also occur,

⁸⁸³ Tulinius, p. 45.

⁸⁸⁴ Tulinius, p. 254.

though more often, in the *Fornaldar sqgur*. Hence, I will focus my study largely on these two saga groups.

Turning to the economics of alcohol consumption, we will see that it enabled chieftains and/or farmers to gain more power, since feasts functioned as a social tool partly due to the value and cost of alcoholic beverages offered. In general, one can say that

The prestige value of alcoholic beverages depended on their economic value (i.e. expense and the difficulty of obtaining them) as well as on their symbolic significance (as an indicator of ethnic or social identity.) It is worth noting that the social value was not derived from the alcohol itself but from its conspicuous consumption in the proper context and with the proper accoutrements.⁸⁸⁵

The value of alcoholic beverages was social and mainly linked to how easy or difficult it was to gain access to the beverage offered. As we have previously seen in Chapter 2, not all drinks were equally available to medieval Icelanders and Norwegians. Wine, being the rarest and most exotic had a higher value and esteem. At the opposite extreme one finds milk-based alcoholic beverages, which were readily available. Hence feasting or providing one's guests or retinue with *vín*, *mjqðr*, *mungát*, *ql* or *skyr* was perceived differently, and contributed on a different scale to enhance the reputation of the host. And of course, it also showed the status of the drinkers and/or the perception the host had of them. In other words, due to its value and cost, alcoholic beverages acquired a symbolic nature. For example, one would not expect to see a king being welcomed with a goblet full of *skyr*, as that could be considered as an insult on the part of the host.

Drinking, even more than eating, has a status-conferring and status displaying function [...] It is a socioeconomic and cultural marker. This aspect is well sustained. In most societies, the rich and the elite may consume sophisticated expensive drinks (often alcohol), the poor drink crude ones and long to imitate the upper strata's behaviour.⁸⁸⁶

⁸⁸⁵ Lowry, p. 7.

⁸⁸⁶ de Garine, p. 6.

These different social values of the beverages available seem to be supported by the Eddic poem *Rígsþula*, in which Heimdallr, one of the Æsir, goes to explore the world and originates the different social classes. When he arrives at the house of those who are to be called *Iarl* (Earl) and give origin to the ruling class, he receives the following hospitality:

*Fram setti hón scutla fulla,
silfri varða, setti á biðð,
fán oc flesci oc fugla steicta;
vín var í kqнно, varðir kálcar;
drucco oc domðo; dagr var á sinnom.*⁸⁸⁷

(She set out full plates, / silver-ornamented, she set on the table, / fresh game and pork meat and roasted fowls; / wine was in the cups, ornamented goblets; / they drank and talked; the day was passing.)

However, when he arrives to the household of those who are to be called *Þræl* (Thrall, or Slave) he gets the following welcome:

*Þá tóe Edda øcqvinn hleif,
þungan oc þyccan, þrunginn sáðom;
bar hon meirr at þat miðra scutla,
soð var í bolla, setti á biðð;
var kálfr soðinn, krása beztr.*⁸⁸⁸

(Then Great-Grandmother took a lumpy loaf, / heavy and thick, full of grains; / she brought more than in the middle of the plates, / broth was in the bowl, she set it on the table; / it was calf-broth, the best delicacy.)

In these examples we are able to see the different goods found at the table of two different social classes. While in the household of the ruling class we can see the most luxurious dishes and, most important for this study, the most prestigious beverage (*vín*) the lowest class seems to have the roughest foodstuff and tableware. Also, stanza 4 does not mention any drinks at the thrall's table, though one cannot discard the possibility that the beverage was actually the calf-broth served in the bowl. If one was to see a beverage listed with the thrall's meal, one would expect to see a drink that was just as rough as the meal they eat, and must have been most probably water, a milk product or,

⁸⁸⁷ *Rþ* 32.

⁸⁸⁸ *Rþ* 4.

perhaps, broth. Unfortunately stanza 18 in which, following the pattern of the poem, Heimdallr shares a meal with those who are to be called *Karl* (the Common Folk, i.e. Farmers) is lost. We do actually know that he shared a meal with them for stanza 19 begins with “*reis frá borði*”⁸⁸⁹ (he rose from the table), and there we could have expected to find a list of foodstuff, drinks and tableware appropriate to their social class; that is, most probably, *ql* or *mungát*.

At least in theory, people were expected to consume drinks within the limits of their social class. Accordingly, in the *Íslendinga sqgur* and in the *Sturlunga saga*, which deal mainly with farmers, we rarely find references to *vin*⁸⁹⁰ while in contrast there is a plethora of references to the consumption of *ql* and *mungát*. On the other hand, the *Fornaldar sqgur*, which narrate mainly the stories of legendary kings and heroes, have several references to *vin*. As mentioned earlier, this difference might be due to an idealized conception of the Scandinavian past, in which there was plenty of wine, the most exotic drink, available. But, if these sagas are indeed an ideological construct, one should then expect that these references to kings and heroes drinking wine are also ideologically and symbolically loaded. They followed (or maybe created) the notion that wine is the proper beverage of the ruling class.

As we have seen in Chapter 2, alcoholic beverages were not exactly cheap. So, due to the great economic cost of both production and procurement, they became highly valued within the realm of the symbolic; and so did the containers in which they were served. Taking all of this into consideration, hosting a feast or offering alcoholic drinks was not only a matter of joy and celebration; it was also a way of doing politics, a way of acquiring or augmenting one’s power. And this is what will occupy us in the following pages.

⁸⁸⁹ *Rb* 19.

⁸⁹⁰ In the *Íslendinga sqgur* there are only two direct references to *vin*, namely in *Jqkul* III and in *Eg* XVII, that is of course, apart from the *Vínland sagas* (see *OrðT*, *vin*). In the *Sturlunga saga* there are only four direct references to *vin*, which occur in *PrestGuð* XII, *ÞórðK* XLVIII, *ÞorSk* II and in *SturlB* II. For an analysis of these occurrences, see Chapter 2.

6.1- ALCOHOL AS PART OF THE OLD NORSE GIFT-GIVING CULTURE

This section will be devoted to the study of the way in which feasting and alcoholic drinks were used and portrayed in mediaeval Icelandic literature in connection with the quest for power through gift-giving. Among the several ways in which power can be defined, I have chosen to follow one of its meanings, as provided by the Oxford Dictionary, which is power as he “capacity to direct or influence the behaviour of others; personal or social influence.”⁸⁹¹ First I will analyze the role that alcohol played as part of the prevailing gift-giving culture, where its main role was more of a symbolic than of an economic nature. Secondly, I will analyze the role of feasting and alcohol as symbols of wealth and power, and the role they played in reaffirming and increasing the power of individuals or groups of individuals. My main goal in this section is to clarify the role that alcohol, as a rare and expensive commodity, played in the struggle for power in the Medieval Icelandic Commonwealth.

As we have seen in Chapter 2, in Iceland, unlike the rest of Europe, the lack of resources meant that alcoholic beverages were not only scarce but also a rather expensive commodity. The situation was just slightly better in Norway. Ale prices did not decrease even when in the late thirteenth century the Hanseatic and English merchants were able to start exporting large amounts of beer to the Nordic countries, and the average price of a wine barrel remained higher than the price paid as compensation for the death of farmer.⁸⁹² In general, throughout the Middle Ages alcohol remained a costly product and its offering could have been just as valuable and meaningful as the offering of an expensive gift that could have been difficult to repay. In short, at least during the period in which most of the sagas were written down, alcohol was a commodity that not every ordinary farmer could afford either to produce

⁸⁹¹ *OED*, Power.

⁸⁹² For alcohol prices see Chapter 2.

or to buy; and even less to offer freely to a large gathering of men and women. Definitely not every average Icelander could afford to host an average fortnight-long feast for 60 people or more. It seems that both in literature and in real life this was reserved only for chieftains or for wealthy farmers, figures who already enjoyed an influential role in society, and, as we will see in this chapter, they used alcohol and feasting to increase their power.⁸⁹³

In my opinion there were two ways by which alcohol could help to increase the power of a certain individual. First, alcohol, through feasting and hospitality, formed part of the Icelandic gift-giving or gift-exchanging culture. Secondly, the possession and most important, the generous offering of alcohol served as a way of displaying an already existing wealth and power, which in return would increase the number of allegiances of the provider.

Let us begin by analyzing the role of alcohol as part of the Icelandic gift-giving culture. The ideology behind gift-giving is summarized in stanza 42 of *Hávamál*, a collection of Eddic poems that impart social wisdom. This stanza reads:

*Vin sínom scal maðr vinr vera
oc gjalda gíof við gjaf;
hlátr við hlátri scyli hqlðar taca,
enn lausung við lygi.⁸⁹⁴*

(A man should be friend to his friends / and
pay back gift for gift; / laugh for laughter he
learns to give, / and treachery for lies.)

In other words, in order to gain and maintain a friendship, gifts should be exchanged, gifts should be repaid with other gifts. As Jón Viðar Sigurðsson puts it in his book, *Chieftains and Power in the Icelandic Commonwealth*

“In Iceland, gifts were employed to establish or renew ties of friendship or loyalty. If the recipient could not afford to give another gift in return, the gift should be paid for by rendering services; otherwise it could be taken back. It was the return gift or service that ensured the right to own or dispose of the gift. Because of the strong obligation to reciprocate,

⁸⁹³ For a study of gift-giving in archaic societies, such as pygmy communities, Polynesian tribes or the ancient Roman world, and not involving alcohol in its discussion, see Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (London: Routledge, 1990).

⁸⁹⁴ *Háv* 42.

gifts were a good instrument by which the various types of chieftain could bind support to them.”⁸⁹⁵

Accordingly, it is customary in literature to see the host of a feast offering gifts, such as swords, axes, rings, horses etc, to his guests before they left for their own farms. This was a way of reaffirming the already existing friendship and bonds between the host and his guests. Refusing to accept a gift meant that the recipient did not want to acknowledge the friendship anymore. The same happened when it came to the offering of alcohol, refusing to accept a drink or to drink with a certain community could be interpreted as a sign of hostility. So it is reported in *Halldor þátr Snorrasons inn síðari* that during a feast the king finds out that one of his men is drinking less than the others. It is said that when the king sees this man’s horn

sá gqrta í gegnum, at hann hafði drukkit vel til hálfvís við Þóri; en honum gekk seint af at drekka. Þá mælti konungr: ‘Seint er þó menn at reyna, Halldórr,’ segir hann, ‘er þú niðisk á drykkju við gamalmenni ok hleypr at vændiskonum um síðkveldum, en fylgir eigi konungi þínum.’⁸⁹⁶

(it was noticeable that he had drunk half as much as Þórir, who was a slow drinker. Then the king said ‘It takes a while before you see people in their true colours, Halldórr’, he said, ‘and you break faith in drinking with old men, and rush off to whores late in the night instead of following your king.’)

People have to rush to Halldórr’s defence to prove that he is loyal to the king, by saying “þér mæltuð illa ok ómakliga í gærkveld til Halldórr, vinar yðvars, er þér kennduð honum, at hann drykki sleitiliga.”⁸⁹⁷ (you spoke badly and unjustly to Halldórr, your friend, when you accused him of drinking unfairly.) Halldórr was being accused of not drinking enough, of refusing the king’s friendship either by neglecting his alcohol or by not engaging with the community in general drunkenness. As we will see later in this chapter, a person remaining sober among drunkards was normally considered a threat to his less aware companions; however, in this case the main reason for the king’s anger seems to be Halldórr’s refusal to drink as much as his drinking mates. Halldórr seems to

⁸⁹⁵ Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, p. 91.

⁸⁹⁶ *Halls II*, p. 268.

⁸⁹⁷ *Halls II*, p. 268

be refusing the king's costly gift and therefore he appears to be refusing the king's friendship.

Now, it seems that the same ideology that was applied to material gifts could be also applied to alcohol and feasting in Iceland. In saga literature one can often read about the way in which good friendships were maintained, both through the exchange of material; gifts as well as through the exchange of feasts. For example *Laxdæla saga* narrates that through the years

*Þeir Ólafr ok Ósvifr héldu sinni vináttu, þótt nokkut væri þústr á með inum yngnum mǫnnum. Þat sumar hafði Ólafr heimboð hálfum mánuði fyrir vetr. Ósvifur hafði ok boð stofnat at vetrnóttum; bauð þá hvárr þeirra qðrum til sín með svá marga menn, sem þá þætti hvárum mestr sómi at vera.*⁸⁹⁸

(Ólafr and Ósvifr preserved their friendship despite the ill feelings between the younger men [in their families]. That summer Ólafr held a feast two weeks before the beginning of winter. Ósvifr had also organized a similar feast during the winter nights; each of them invited the other to attend his feast with as large a following as he felt did him the greatest honour.)

Similarly, the friendship between Njáll Þorgeirsson and Gunnarr of Illiðarendi, perhaps the most celebrated friendship in saga literature, seems to have the following basis: according to *Njáls saga* “*Þat var siðvenja þeirra Gunnars ok Njáls, at sinn vetr þá hvárr heimboð at qðrum ok vetrgríð fyrir vináttu sakir.*”⁸⁹⁹ (It was the custom between Gunnarr and Njál, because of their close friendship, that every winter one of them would invite the other to his home for a winter feast.) There are too many examples of friends exchanging feast for feast through the years to list them all here. It seems as if the act of being invited to a feast needed to be returned in a similar fashion, just as it happened with material gifts. The main difference being that material gifts could be repaid either with other material objects or with services, while a symbolic gift, such as a feast and alcohol could be repaid only within the same symbolic sphere to which

⁸⁹⁸ *Laxd* XLVI, p. 139.

⁸⁹⁹ *Nj* XXXV

feasting and drinking belonged to. That is, it could only be paid back with allegiance, friendship or another feast.

As a matter of fact, it seems that feasts could be offered to a person as a gift. For example in *Vatnsdæla saga* it is said that, after a battle King Haraldr tells Ingimundr that “*en þá er vér hqfum skipað ríki vart, skal ek launa þér liðsemdina með heimboði ok vingjqfum.*”⁹⁰⁰ (when we arrive in our kingdom, I shall reward your support with a feast and with gifts of friendship.) Just like any other gift, feasts and alcohol could be offered in exchange for support or expecting a return-gift that had a similar symbolic meaning. And just like any other gift, the gift of a feast or alcohol had to be returned in a certain way; material or symbolic. But what happened when it was beyond someone’s means to repay a feast? And taking into consideration the current alcohol prices, it seems that more often than not, most of the guests to a feast were not able to return the favour to their host. Then they had to pay back symbolically, with friendship and support, by creating a community around the figure of the chieftain. As Jón Viðar Sigurðsson puts it, “those who ate together and drank together, belonged together.”⁹⁰¹ In this sense, hosting a feast created social bonds, both between the guests themselves as well as between the host and his guests. This binding resulted in an increased power for the chieftain, not only as a result of expanding his network of support, but also by strengthening the inner bonds within his community. A good example of how this worked comes from *Íslendinga saga*, where Gizurr organizes a feast to which he invites members of two rival families that have had a long blood-feud. When the tension at the feasting hall starts growing due to the fact that two feuding groups are gathered in the same hall, Gizurr makes the following speech:

*Ætla ek at þessi samkundu skulim vér binda með fullu góðu vörn
félagsskap með mágsemð þeiri, er til er hugat. En til varhygðar vil ek*

⁹⁰⁰ *Vatn IX*, p. 27.

⁹⁰¹ Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, pp. 126-27.

*gríð setja allra manna í milli, þeirra er hér eru saman komnir, at hverr sé í góðum huga til annars í orði ok verki*⁹⁰²

(I intend that at this feast we shall bind our fellowship in all trustworthiness, among every one of our families here. But as a precaution I want to establish a truce among all the men who have come here together, so that in both word and deed each person will maintain his good faith toward all others.)

The result of this speech is an actual truce, and the saga reports that by the second day of the feast the ancient dispute had been forgotten and “*gengu með hornum allir*”⁹⁰³ (everyone went to the drinking horns) so that in the end the members of the previously feuding families “*drukku af einu silfrkeri ok minntust við jafnan um daginn, er hvárr drakk til annars.*”⁹⁰⁴ (drank from the same silver goblet and, throughout the day, they saluted each other with a kiss while each toasted to the other.) Thus ends a long history of killings through the bonds created in the drinking hall, and the result of this is an increased power for both of the families, as from then on they counted on each other’s support when later on they engaged in feuds with other people.

Alcohol and feasting could be used as a display of power, and as a way of increasing it by gaining alliances through the bonds created in the drinking hall. For example, *Vatnsdæla saga* narrates that on one occasion two foreign sisters arrive in Iceland and, as a way of affirming their place in society they organize a feast. The saga summarizes this act in the following manner “*Gróa keypti malt ok bjó til veizlu ok bauð Ingimundarsonum þangat; - eigi þóttu þær systir svá lítills háttar vera*”⁹⁰⁵ (Gróa bought malt and prepared a feast and invited the sons of Ingimundr to attend; - thus the sisters were not held to be of such little importance.) Thus, the sisters make clear that they have economic power which can be transferred into political power. Their first act when they arrive in Iceland is to make that clear by offering a feast. The statement that they bought malt implies most surely alcohol-brewing and with it the ability to freely offer alcohol

⁹⁰² *Ísl* CLXX, p. 483.

⁹⁰³ *Ísl* CLXX, p. 483.

⁹⁰⁴ *Ísl* CLXX, p. 483.

⁹⁰⁵ *Vatn* XXXVI, p. 95.

at a feast. This gift-giving of alcohol helped them to state/affirm the role that they were willing to play within Icelandic society and, even if only within a thirteenth-century Icelandic point of view, the narrator points that the possibility of offering a feast in which alcohol was offered helped a person to be recognized as an influential character: either on the economic grounds of having wealth to spare or, most probably, by their ability to gain alliances through the symbolic gift-giving of a good that could be repaid with loyalty or friendship. The politics involved in feast-organizing, as we have seen, become apparent through all the decisions involved in the selection of a host for a wedding feast.⁹⁰⁶

In saga literature, there are several cases of chieftains struggling to host a feast and gladly hosting wedding feasts just as there are too many cases of chieftains or farmers exchanging feasts as a symbol of friendship as to mention them all. In general, it seems as if hosting a feast was not only an economic burden (due to the usual fortnight length of feasts and high alcohol prices), but those who were economically able to host one actually fought for their right to host a feast. This can only be perceived as a means of gaining political power or acknowledgement. First of all, as we have seen, not every ordinary farmer could afford to host a fortnight feast due to the costs. But most important, hosting a feast was a way of making a social statement as well as a way of stating/assuring one's place in society. The social statement was a proclamation of one's wealth and most of all, one's willingness to share that wealth with the members of the community. The way of stating one's place in society was more or less the same, but on the symbolic level. It was a way of making allegiances and increasing one's network of support; both by creating a community around one's household as well as a way of creating a network through gift-giving that could be repaid – for most people- only with allegiance and friendship. Generosity in the Old Norse world was a synonym of a great

⁹⁰⁶ See section 5.1.

leader. And the display of generosity through alcohol offering worked in a twofold way: firstly as an act of generosity by freely offering a costly gift and secondly as a way of creating a support network by creating bonds between fellow drinkers.

6.2 – DRINKING VESSELS

*En þat var siðr, at lagðr var matr
á borð fyrir menn, en þá vǫru
engir diskar.⁹⁰⁷*

As seen in Chapter 2, alcoholic drinks were a rather rare and expensive commodity both in Iceland and Norway. This implied that the possession and offering of these beverages was a symbol of prestige, wealth and power on its own, and of course, the more expensive the drink a man was to serve at his table the more respect he would gain from his hospitality. However, the prestige attached to the drink to be served could be highly enhanced by serving it in a vessel whose qualities matched in prestige those of the provider, of the consumer, and of the drink to be served. These drinking vessels were sought by the ruling class, in order to help them display their influence in society as well as their wealth. In this section I will study the characteristics and social status associated with each of the drinking vessels most commonly mentioned in the literary sources. But, before doing so I would like to briefly analyze evidence for the rarity of luxurious drinking ware.

The Old Norse word ‘*rikr*’, meaning both ‘powerful’ and ‘rich’, attests to the ideological connection between these two ideas. Accordingly, a display of wealth was at the same time a display of power. In order to be able to demonstrate their power, among many other things, “members of the elite classes desired prestige items in order to support better their status within their own society.”⁹⁰⁸ As Helgi Þorláksson puts it:

⁹⁰⁷ And that was the custom; the food was served on the table before the men, as there were no dishes then. (*Heið XXII*, p. 276.)

⁹⁰⁸ Robin Torrence, ‘Comments on Ports of Trade in Early Medieval Europe’, *Norwegian Archaeological Review*, 2 (1978), 108-111 (p. 109).

Acquiring goods from abroad was essential for the leading men of Iceland. Most of the farmers were probably self-sufficient, but the chieftains, governed by status motives, needed luxury goods, and, being in charge of churches, they had to provide them with necessities from abroad.⁹⁰⁹

One can count alcohol and the raw ingredients to produce it as well as drinking vessels as part of these luxury imports. In this context it is interesting to note that both the *Íslendinga sqgur* and the *Sturlunga saga* compilation report the import of alcohol and its ingredients but not the import of drinking vessels. On the other hand, in the *Fornaldar sqgur* alcoholic drinks are always ready at hand but these sagas do mention the import of drinking vessels, which tend to have a mythic origin. Instances of this can be found, for example, in *Helga þáttur Þórissonar*, where two emissaries from the mythical land of Glæsisvellir appear at the court of King Óláfr Tryggvason in order to offer him a present:

'Erum vit sendir af Guðmundi á Glæsisvöllum hingat til yðar. Hann sendi yðr kveðju sína ok þar með tvau horn.'
Konungr tók við, ok váru gullbúin. Þetta váru allgóðir gripir. Óláfr konungr átti tvau horn, er Hyrningar váru kallaðir, ok þó at þau væri harðla góð, þá váru þau þó betri, er Guðmundr sendi honum.⁹¹⁰

(‘We are sent to you by Guðmundr of Glæsisvellir. He sends you his greetings and also two horns.’)

The king accepted them, and they were adorned with gold. This was an extraordinary possession. King Óláfr had two horns, that were called the Hyrningar, and even though they were very good the ones that Guðmundr sent him were far better.)

This pair of horns from Glæsisvellir is mentioned in a similar fashion in *Norna-Gests þáttur*, chapter 1. King Óláfr’s horns seem to have been such a prestigious possession and/or symbol of power that the same *Helga þáttur* reports, and concludes the story, by asserting that Óláfr had these horns with him when he died at the battle of Svqldr, in 999/1000 AD.⁹¹¹ Similarly at the end of *Þorsteins þáttur bæjarmagns*, it is also reported that at the moment of his death Óláfr Tryggvason had a pair of drinking horns with

⁹⁰⁹ Helgi Þorláksson, ‘Comments on Ports of Trade in Early Medieval Europe’, *Norwegian Archaeological Review*, 2 (1978), 111-14 (p. 112).

⁹¹⁰ *Helg II*, p. 350.

⁹¹¹ See *Helg III*.

him⁹¹². These horns, called *Hvítningar*, are said to have come from Jqunheim.⁹¹³ It seems that, at least as a literary motif, King Óláfr's drinking horns represented some sort of authority or status so that the tradition of his ownership of them was preserved in different sources.

Another drinking vessel with mythological origins is to be found in *Bósa saga*. In it, Bósi sets out on a deadly mission to Bjarmaland (Permian) in order to obtain a vulture's egg for King Hringr. The egg has the characteristic that it is a "*gammsegg, at skrifat er allt með gullstöfum utan*"⁹¹⁴ (vulture egg that is inscribed all over with gold letters on the outside.) When Bósi finally steals the egg and brings it to the king "*færði Bósi honum eggit, ok var þá brotin rauf á skurninu, ok váru þar í tíu merkr gulls, ok hafði konungr skurnit fyrir borðker.*"⁹¹⁵ (Bósi brought him the egg, and the shell was cracked, and it was worth ten marks of gold, and the king used the shell as a table goblet.) The characteristics of this *borðker* (literally 'table-goblet') seem to be those of many of the different *ker* that we will analyze below: that is, it is made of a precious metal and highly ornamented. In general, this seems to be yet another legendary story of a high-prestige drinking vessel that is said to have been obtained in an exotic land.

Archaeological remains throughout Scandinavia attest to the import of drinking vessels from Europe. The acquisition of these goods was possible due to the local production of commodities scarce on the Continent. As Peter Sawyer puts it:

Long before the Viking period it [i.e. Scandinavia] was a source of exotic luxuries, especially furs, that were exported to the Mediterranean and Western Europe. In return, Scandinavians obtained fine metalwork, jewellery, glassware and other high quality goods.⁹¹⁶

⁹¹² The *Hvítningar* horns are given to King Óláfr Tryggvason after a long struggle with Jarl Agði, from whom they were stolen. Jarl Agði steals them back and takes the horns with him to his grave, from where they are finally recovered for the use of the king.

⁹¹³ See *PostBm* XIII.

⁹¹⁴ *Bós* VI, p. 296.

⁹¹⁵ *Bós* IX, p. 304.

⁹¹⁶ Peter Sawyer, 'Markets and Fairs in Norway and Sweden between the Eighth and Sixteen Centuries', in *Markets in Early Medieval Europe: Trading and Productive Sites, 650-850*, ed. by Tim Pestell (Macclesfield: Windgather Press, 2003), pp. 168-174 (p. 173).

Concerning imported glassware, a large amount of glass shards have been unearched in Northern Norway, at the farm site of Borg, in the Lofoten islands.⁹¹⁷ As a matter of fact, it was the casual discovery of highly ornamented glassware by a local farmer in 1981 that led to the discovery of the site. This occurred when “the local farmer started ploughing the land and revealed not only settlement traces but unexpected finds such as tin foiled pottery and gold foiled glass”⁹¹⁸ Later excavations proved Borg to be a central place, with a longhouse measuring 80 metres. This longhouse is where the majority of the glass fragments at Borg have been found.⁹¹⁹ The Borg finds encompass “a large number of objects displaying wealth, power and prestige, including objects of religious and military significance. They comprise imported tableware for feasts (at least fifteen or sixteen glass vessels; two Tating pitchers; a bronze vessel).”⁹²⁰ As Näsman and Roesdahl mention, the quality of this imported tableware must mean that they were used for special occasions, for feasts in which the chieftain living at Borg needed to display his power and wealth by boasting of the possession of luxurious symbols of his status. The provenance of the imported vessels is uncertain, however “the ceramic and glass material on the whole points to the continent: France and the lower Rhine.”⁹²¹ These areas, as we have already seen in Chapter 2 are precisely the areas from where wine was imported to Scandinavia, and one could expect that these luxurious vessels were used to drink a rather expensive beverage at the hall. All in all “about 55 fragments of glass have been found at the site [i.e. the long-house⁹²²]-shards of at least 6-7 vessels.”⁹²³ By

⁹¹⁷ Glass shards have not been found in Iceland.

⁹¹⁸ Julian Henderson and I. Holand, ‘The Glass from Borg: An Early Medieval Chieftain’s Farm in Northern Norway’, *Medieval Archaeology*, 36 (1992), 29-58 (p. 29).

⁹¹⁹ Gerd Stamsø Munch and others, ‘Borg in Lofoten: A Chieftain’s Farm in Arctic Norway’, in *Proceedings of the Tenth Viking Congress: Larkollen, Norway, 1985*, ed. by James E. Knirk, Universitetets Oldsaksamlings Skrifter, Ny rekke, 9 (Oslo: Universitetets Oldsaksamling, 1987), pp. 149-70 (p. 161).

⁹²⁰ Ulf Näsman and E. Roesdahl, ‘Scandinavian and European Perspectives: Borg I:1’, in *Borg in Lofoten: A Chieftain’s Farm in North Norway*, ed. by Gerd Stamsø Munch and others (Trondheim: Tapir Academic Press, 2003), pp. 283-299 (p. 286).

⁹²¹ Munch and others, ‘Borg in Lofoten’, p. 168.

⁹²² Altogether 256 glass shards were recorded from the excavation of the whole site. Cf. Ingegerd Holand, ‘Glass Vessels’ in *Borg in Lofoten: A Chieftains Farm in North Norway*, ed. by Gerd Stamsø Munch and others (Trondheim: Tapir Academic Press, 2003), pp.211-229 (p. 211).

1992, the shard collection, dated to the 1st millennium AD, was up to 115 fragments representing ten to twelve vessels.⁹²⁴ These shards are highly ornamented, as for example those belonging to a “reticella glass of a delicate blue colour, the twisted thread blue and yellow.”⁹²⁵ Colourful reticella ornamentation does not seem to be common in North-Western Europe, as shards of this kind of decoration have only been found at Ribe, in Denmark; Whitby Abbey, in England; Staraja, in Russia and Portchester, in England.⁹²⁶ But the most luxurious ones belong to a vessel, possibly a funnel beaker stylistically dated to the period between 750 and 850 AD, decorated with gold foil, of which no other specimen has been found in Northern Norway.⁹²⁷ Based on minor differences in the chemical composition of the glass as well as in slight colour variations, all twenty-three shards of gold-foiled glass seem to indicate that they come from two different vessels.⁹²⁸ A few similar “sherds have appeared on nine other sites in Scandinavia and elsewhere in North-Western Europe⁹²⁹ [presenting] traces reminiscent of certain elements in the Borg glass, like lines, lozenges and triangles”⁹³⁰ Absence of evidence could on some occasions imply evidence of absence, and the high ornamentation, and most probably also high cost, of this gold-foiled vessel can well mean that there weren’t many other similar examples in Norway.⁹³¹ Its uniqueness must have implied great prestige for its owner when the vessel was displayed at feasts. Also, considering their remote origin, these kinds of vessels could also have lead to some

⁹²³ Munch and others, ‘Borg in Lofoten’, p. 161.

⁹²⁴ Henderson and Holand, ‘Glass from Borg’, p. 33 and; Holand, ‘Glass Vessels’, p. 211.

⁹²⁵ Munch and others, ‘Borg in Lofoten’, p. 161.

⁹²⁶ See Holand, ‘Glass Vessels’, p. 213. Other types of reticella glass are known from other many sites around North-Western Europe.

⁹²⁷ See Henderson and Holand, ‘Glass from Borg’, p. 49 and; Holand, ‘Glass Vessels’, p. 218.

⁹²⁸ See Holand, ‘Glass Vessels’, p. 217.

⁹²⁹ These have been found at sites in Dorestad, Liege, Helgo, Valsgärde, Paderborn, Åhus, Niedermunster, Toroslunda and Ribe. Cf. Henderson and Holand, Glass from Borg, p. 50.

⁹³⁰ Henderson and Holand, ‘Glass from Borg’, p. 49.

⁹³¹ Some earlier examples of glass, dated between the third and first centuries BC, having a similar gold decoration have been found in Italy, and are stylistically believed to have their origin in Egypt. Cf. Henderson and Holand, ‘Glass from Borg’, p. 49.

mythological legends about their origins, similar to the ones previously discussed from saga literature.

The fact that there are ten to twelve vessels recorded from the site at the long-house does not imply that there was an abundance of them at any single time. It seems that, considering the period during which the site was in use, there were “around three vessels per century or one per generation [...] only one or two vessels were new at any one time, and that, unlike pottery, there was a steady import of glass vessels all through the Late Iron Age.”⁹³² Although we are unable to estimate the lifespan of each vessel, the fact that luxurious containers were not abundant at any single period of time adds to the symbolic role that they may have played at ceremonies. With an average of three vessels per century one can well assume that each one of them had an important role in the chieftain’s display of wealth and power.

An urban site, market-place and probably royal seat, in function within the period AD 890-1300,⁹³³ located in Vestfold, in the Oslofjord, has the largest documented collection of shards in Norway. This site, called Kaupang or Skiringssal [Marketplace or perhaps Shining-Hall⁹³⁴] has revealed over 2000 fragments of pottery, which added to other findings, show that it was more a trading centre than a farming site.⁹³⁵ Due to the variety of shards, it is impossible to define how many vessels they belonged to. “Ellen Karine Haugen has suggested that most of the foreign pottery vessels are more probably the visiting merchants’ containers for provisions and for cooking than wares destined for sale at Kaupang.”⁹³⁶ Yet, some of these shards belonged to tin foil decorated artefacts, which might imply that they were prestigious wares rather than daily use pottery. But we shall return to this point later in this chapter.

⁹³² Holand, ‘Glass Vessels’, p. 211.

⁹³³ Dagfinn Skre, ‘Introduction’, in *Kaupang in Skiringssal: Kaupang Excavation Project Publication Series*, ed. by Dagfinn Skre (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2007), pp. 13-24 (p. 13).

⁹³⁴ For a discussion on the possible meanings of Skiringssal see Stefan Brink, ‘Skiringssal, Kaupang, Tjølling: the Toponymic Evidence’, in *Kaupang in Skiringssal*, ed. by Dagfinn Skre pp. 53-64.

⁹³⁵ Charlotte Blindheim, ‘Commerce and Trade in Viking Age Norway: Exchange of Products or Organized Transactions?’, *Norwegian Archaeological Review*, 15:1-2 (1982), 8-18 (p. 11).

⁹³⁶ Blindheim, p. 11.

For the moment, let us concentrate on the glass shards found at the site. Over 450 glass pieces have been excavated at Kaupang. As Charlotte Blindheim states;

some of them could be the remains of whole bowls or beakers, which were brought here to the market. But others have more probably been taken home as fragments, to be melted down to glass beads, of which we have found many hundreds in the settlement area.⁹³⁷

As it is impossible to determine which glass shards belong to complete vessels and which ones were raw materials for jewellery production (and perhaps one should also consider that entire vessels that were accidentally broken were re-used in the fabrication of glass beads) I have decided to focus only on the glass fragments deposited as grave-goods. For the purposes of this study I will assume that the glass shards found in graves were most probably deposited as a whole or as intentionally broken vessels during the inhumation. Of the 407 graves excavated in Kaupang, only 5 contained glass shards and one a copper alloy mount for a drinking horn. All these graves - catalogue numbers 277, 283, 284, 301, 304 and 305 - are boat grave inhumations.⁹³⁸ These graves contents and approximate dated are as follows:⁹³⁹

GRAVE	DATE (AD)	GLASS FINDS
304	800-850	5 glass shards
283	850-950?	Copper alloy drinking horn mount
301	860-900	Glass shard
305	c. 900	3 glass shards
284	900-950	Fragmentary glass beaker
277	950-1000	Glass shard (from beaker?)

The fact that glass shards seem to be a rare grave offering (in comparison with the multitude of soapstone and pottery vessels deposited in the Kaupang graves) attests to the rarity and probable high value of ornamented glass drinking vessels. Also, just as in the case of Borg, we seem to have only three examples of glass vessels per century. What is also striking is that they all were deposited almost in succession; that is almost

⁹³⁷ Blindheim, p. 12.

⁹³⁸ Table based on Frans-Arne Stylegar, 'The Kaupang Cemeteries Revisited', in *Kaupang in Skiringssal*, ed. by Skre, pp. 104-127.

⁹³⁹ Stylegar, pp. 104-127.

one every 33 years on average, starting in AD 800. It is tempting from this data to consider the possibility that these graves might represent a lineage of chieftains, each buried with his own prestigious drinking vessel. However, we know that these graves belonged to rich merchants or local farmers, as the royal cemetery in Vestfold is located in Borre, near Kaupang. In any case, the fact that, at least in the case of grave offerings, glass drinking vessels were also a rare artefact at the Kaupang site confirms their high cost and, with it, the prestige associated to them.

Glassware and drinking vessels seem to have been imported to Scandinavia throughout the Middle Ages. This does not imply that highly decorated vessels were a cheap commodity available to all. On the contrary, they seem to have been quite rare, and thus a symbol of status and power. But at some point during the late thirteenth or early fourteenth centuries, with the emergence of the Hanseatic League, they appear to have become more common. This fact seems to be attested by a law, passed in 1316 by King Haakon Magnusson, regulating the import of 'beer-finery'. The law reads "*varom monnum ero [eingi lutir lofader at kaupane ut sgra i Tydesko lande nema biors glis oc [adrer lutir þa sem varo lande ero litt þarfleger*"⁹⁴⁰ (our men are not allowed to buy nor to journey to the German Land to obtain *bjórr* finery and other goods that in our land are of little use.) This law might imply that an excess in the import of *bjórr*-finery, i.e. drinking vessels, led either to a decrease in their symbolic value or to a great loss of Norwegian capital due to the people's desire to acquire luxurious drinking vessels. To my knowledge there are no other laws regulating the import of drinking vessels.

All in all it is a difficult task to identify the different archaeological finds and connect them with the names they are given in the literary corpus. For example, the Old Norse word *gler* (glass) is used to refer to glass drinking vessels on only three occasions, namely in the Eddic poem *Hymiskviða* (*gler*), in the *Homiliu bók* (*gler*-

⁹⁴⁰ NGL III, p. 118. *Kong Haakon Magnussöns Retterbod om Udlændingers Told*; Bergen, July 30, 1318.

kaleikr) and in *Mariu saga* (*gler-ker*), leaving us with only these tree Old Norse signifiers for the different types of glass vessels recorded in archaeology.⁹⁴¹ This fact may be connected to the fact that Iceland, where most of our literary sources were written down, has not yet yielded any archaeological evidence of glass drinking vessels. Also, as we will see, the terminology used to denote different kinds of drinking vessels seems to overlap from time to time. At the same time, the descriptions of the vessels given in the literature are scant; so it is difficult to know exactly which particular kind of vessel they refer to. Perhaps drinking horns and jugs are the only ones we can identify with actual remains.

The most common Old Norse drinking vessels are the *kalkr* or *kalekr*, the *ker* and the *horn*. In the following pages I will study the characteristics and social esteem of each one of these types of vessel.

KALKR OR KALEKR

Perhaps one of the most prestigious drinking vessels was the *kalkr* or *kalekr*. Both these words mean chalice, cup or goblet.⁹⁴² Even though this kind of vessel is mentioned only in a few instances in the written sources, we can gather its high regard from the role it plays in the Eddic poem *Rígsþula*, mentioned earlier in this chapter, where it appears at the table of the ruling class. At the house of Jarl, one finds that “*vín var í kǫnno, varðir kalcar.*”⁹⁴³ (wine was in the cups, ornamented goblets.) Here we find the most luxurious dishes, and the most luxurious objects in a setting that corresponds with the rank of the host. As we can see, the drink at the table is wine, the most expensive of beverages in

⁹⁴¹ The word *gler* appears in many other occasions in the corpus, albeit with a different meaning. “The word originally meant amber” and can also refer to glass-beads and even to glass windows (*gler-gluggar*) or ice. (See *IED*, *gler*) The above mentioned are the only instances in which it refers to an actual glass vessel. The *ONP* online entry for *gler* reports 26 instances of the use of the word; however, since the project is not yet complete, they are not provided. *OrdT* provides only one example, namely, that in *Nj* XCII, p. 233; “hált sem gler” (slippery as ice) and so there are no references to glass-vessels in this group of sagas (see *OrdT*, *gler*)

⁹⁴² *IED*, *kalekr* and *kalkr*.

⁹⁴³ *Rþ* 32.

the Norse world, and one can expect it to be served in one of the most prestigious of vessels; a silver-decorated *kalkr* or goblet to match the silver-ornamented plates.

Within the context of Eddic poetry, we find another instance in which goblets appear in a royal setting, though in a more sinister context. In *Atlakviða*, one of the poems that recount the story of the *Vqlsungs*, they are mentioned when Guðrún feeds Atli the flesh of his sons to eat as revenge for the death of her brother. On this occasion

*Út gecc þá Guðrún Atla í gong,
með gyltom kálki, at reifa giold ragnis*⁹⁴⁴

[Then Guðrún went out to meet Atli/ with golden goblets,
to offer tribute to the gods.]

As for their contents we are told that: it “*umðo qlscálar Atla, vlnhqfgar.*”⁹⁴⁵ (the ale-cups of Atli resounded, heavy with wine) It is interesting to note that the goblets are said to be *qlscalir* [ale-goblets] even though they are used for wine. This inconsistency is most probably due to the requirements of metrics and alliteration in the poem. After all one would expect that such luxurious vessels would be full of wine instead of ale.

This same episode is also described in the Eddic poem *Atlamál*:

*Maga hefir þú þinna mist, sem þú silt scyldir;
hausa veiz þú þeira hafða at qlscálam,
drygða ec þér svá dryccio: dreyra blett ec þeira.*⁹⁴⁶

(You have lost your boys, as you least wanted; / their
skulls, you know, you had as ale-cups, / I increased that
drink for you, I blended it with their blood.)

Vqlsunga saga, largely based on the Eddic poems about the *Vqlsungs* narrates the episode in almost the same words as *Atlamál* 82: “*Þú hefir misst þinna sona, ok eru þeira hausar hér at borðkerum hafðir, ok sjalfr drakktu þeira blóð við vln blandit.*”⁹⁴⁷ (You have lost your sons, and their skulls are here as table-goblets, and you drank their blood mixed with wine.)

⁹⁴⁴ *Akv* 33.

⁹⁴⁵ *Akv* 34.

⁹⁴⁶ *Am* 82.

⁹⁴⁷ *Vqls* XXXVIII, p. 211.

In a similarly grim context, *Vǫlundarkviða*, an Eddic poem narrating the imprisonment and revenge of a smith named Vǫlundr, describes the forging of what is most probably pair of silver goblets. In it Vǫlundr says to King Níðuðr:

<i>Gacc þú til smiðio</i>	<i>þeirar er þú gorðir,</i>
<i>þar fiðr þú belgi</i>	<i>blóði stocna:</i>
<i>sneið ec af haufuð</i>	<i>húna þinna,</i>
<i>oc undir fen fíoturs</i>	<i>fætr um lagðac.</i>

<i>En þær scalar,</i>	<i>er und scqrom vóro</i>
<i>sveip ec utan silfri,</i>	<i>senda ec Níðaði.⁹⁴⁸</i>

(Go to the smithy that which you built/ there you will find blood-stained bellows:/ I cut off the heads of your boys,/ and under the mud of the forge-well their feet I laid.
And those bowls that beneath the hair were/ I cast in silver, I sent them to Níðuðr.)

On this occasion the heads of the children also end as high prestige vessels, decorated in silver. We are not told exactly into what kind of vessel they were transformed; while the skulls are referred to as *scalar* (bowls) this does not necessarily refer to the end product.

The stories about Guðrún's and Vǫlundr's revenge seem to have been well known both in the Middle Ages, and in the present day these episodes may account for the generalized and romantic misconception that the Vikings used the skulls of their enemies as drinking vessels. As far as I have gathered from the sources these are the only two occasions in which such a custom is attested in the Old Norse corpus.⁹⁴⁹ And as we can see from the context of these episodes, turning skulls into goblets seems to have been considered quite a barbaric and isolated act, inspired mostly by revenge. Also it is possible to perceive that both King Atli and King Níðuðr were not aware of the fact that the goblets they had been using were made out of human heads.

A further occurrence of a *kalkr* related to heads, though in a different fashion, is that narrated in the Eddic poem *Hymiskviða* during one of Þórr's strength-contests. On this

⁹⁴⁸ *Vkv* 34-35.

⁹⁴⁹ There are also references to the use of skulls as drinking vessels in *Historia Longobardum* I, 27 and II, 28.

occasion the *Jqtunn* Hymir challenges Þórr to prove his strength by breaking a glass-goblet.

29 - <i>Enn Hlórriði,</i>	<i>er at hqndom kom,</i>
<i>brát lét bresta</i>	<i>brattstein gleri;</i>
<i>sló hann sitiandi</i>	<i>súlor í gognom;</i>
<i>báro þó heilan</i>	<i>fyr Hymi síðan.</i>

(When Hlórriði [Þórr], when he had it in his hands / soon threw the glass against the stone column; / he struck it against the column while sitting / yet whole they took it back to Hymir.)

30 - <i>Unz þat in friða</i>	<i>frilla kendi,</i>
<i>ástráð mikit</i>	<i>eitt, er vissi:</i>
<i>"Drep við haus Hymis!</i>	<i>hann er harðari,</i>
<i>kostmóðs iotuns,</i>	<i>kalki hveriom."</i>

(Until the beautiful mistress taught him / a kind advice that she knew: / Strike it [the vessel] against Hymir's skull, it is harder, / the meat-weary *Jqtunn*'s, than any *kalkr*.)

31- <i>Harðr reis á kné</i>	<i>hafra dróttinn,</i>
<i>færdiz allra</i>	<i>í ásmegin;</i>
<i>heill var karli</i>	<i>hiálmstofn ofan,</i>
<i>en vinferill,</i>	<i>valr, rifnaði.⁹⁵⁰</i>

(Hardy stood up the lord of goats [Þórr], / bringing all his Ás power; / whole was the man [Hymir] on the top part of the head, / when the round wine-barrel broke.)

In this incident the *kalkr* is removed from a regal context. However we can see that, as in the previous instances, it is associated with wine since it is referred to as a round *vinferill*⁹⁵¹ (wine-barrel). This then agrees with our premise that goblets were the most esteemed drinking vessels and, even if they were not always used to consume wine, the ideological association around them tends to link them with the most esteemed of beverages - wine.

These drinking vessels do not appear very often in saga literature. There are just three further instances in the sources, two of which are connected with supernatural events and the other one with a pagan ritual.⁹⁵²

⁹⁵⁰ *Hym* 29-31.

⁹⁵¹ *Vinferill* – This seems to be a scribal error, as the compound makes no sense. The original word was most probably *vinberill* [wine-barrel]. See *IED*, *vinferill*. *IEW* and *AEW* do not contain entries for this term. Nor did any other dictionaries I consulted.

⁹⁵² The only instances are those in *Hallfr* XI, p. 199, *Gullþ* III, p. 185-86, and *Yng* XXXVII, p. 68.

Snorri Sturluson narrates in *Ynglinga saga* that during a feast offered to King Hjqrvarðr by King Granmarr in Norway, the men sat at a *tvímenningr* drinking session.⁹⁵³ In it:

*Hásæti Hjqrvarðs konungs var búið gagnvart hásæti Granmars konungs, ok sátu allir hans menn á þann pall. Þá mælti Granmarr konungr við Hildigunni, dóttur sína, at hon skyldi búa sik ok bera ql vikingum. Hún var allra kvinna fríðust. Þá tók hon silfrkalk einn ok fyllði ok gekk fyrir Hjqrvarð konung ok mælti: "Allir heilir Ylfingar at Hrólfs minni kraka" ok drakk af til hálfis ok seldi Hjqrvarði konungi. Nú tók hann kalkinn ok hqnd hennar með ok mælti, at hon skyldi ganga at sitja hjá honum.*⁹⁵⁴

[King Hjqrvarðr's high-seat was arranged opposite the high-seat of King Granmarr, and all his men at that bench. Then said King Granmarr to Hildigunnr, his daughter, that she should get ready and serve ale to the Vikings. She was the most beautiful of all women. Then she took a silver goblet and filled it and went towards King Hjqrvarðr and said: 'All health to you Ylfings, in memory of Hrólfr Kraki' and drank half of it and passed it to King Hjqrvarðr. Then he took the goblet and her hand with it and said that she should go and sit next to him.]

This passage seems also to confirm the prestige that goblets enjoyed during the Viking Age. First of all, this particular goblet is said to be used during feasts, at which a king could well display his wealth in front of as many witnesses as possible. As mentioned before, wealth and power were not only exhibited at feasts by showing the large numbers of supporters that a man had, but also by showing magnificence both in the goods offered during the feast and in the vessels in which they were served. As mentioned earlier on, concepts of wealth and power seem to have been coupled, as the Old Norse adjective *rikr* means both 'powerful' and 'wealthy', and they were most probably made conspicuous in the same fashion: ostentation of wealth and display of power. Hence at the feast, the king shows that he is a *rikr maðr* [rich-powerful man] by exhibiting his luxury objects, such as a silver goblet. The power-display effect of the feast might have not been the same if the vessel had been roughly made out of wood, for example. Second, as we have seen before in relation to goblets, these vessels seem

⁹⁵³ *Tvímennigar* will be discussed in Chapter 6.

⁹⁵⁴ *Yng XXXVII*, p. 68

to be particularly associated with the nobility, and only later with the Christian Church's services.

The only religious use of a *kalekr* in our sources occurs near the end of *Hallfreðar saga*. In this episode the late King Óláfr Tryggvason appears in a dream to a Hebridean abbot in order to report that some slaves from his parish have stolen the grave-goods of his poet Hallfreðr. The grave-goods are recovered by the abbot and are said to have been put to the following use: "*Kalekr var gerr af hringinum, en altarisklæði af skikkjunni, en kertastikur ór hjálminum.*"⁹⁵⁵ (A chalice was made from the [golden arm-] ring, and an altar-cloth from the cloak, and candlesticks from the helmet.) On this occasion, the chalice would have also been used for wine, as dictated by Christian liturgy.

The final occurrence of a goblet in the written sources is that in *Þorskfirðinga saga* and is also connected to a dream. The saga narrates that the night before he is supposed to break into Agnarr's burial-mound, Þórir dreams that Agnarr appears to him and asks him to break into Valr's cave instead. Once Þórir agrees to do so Agnarr offers him a goblet and the following scene takes place:

Nú er hér kalkr, er þú skalt drekka af tvá drykki, en förunautr þinn einn drykk, en þá verður eptir þat sem má." Síðan vaknar Þórir, ok váru þessir hlutir allir þar í hjá honum, er Agnar gaf honum. Ketilbjörn vaknar ok hafði heyrt allt þeirra viðmæli ok svá sét, hvar Agnar fór. Hann bað Þóri taka þenna kost. Eptir þat tók Þórir kalkinn ok drakk af tvá drykki, en Ketilbjörn einn. Þá var enn eptir í kalkinum. Þórir setti þá á munn sér ok drakk af allt. Nú féll á þá svefn.

*Agnar kom þá enn ok ávitaði Þóri, er hann hafði allt ór drukkit kalkinum, ok kvað hann þess drykkjar gjalda mundu hinn síðara hlut ævi sinnar.*⁹⁵⁶

(‘Now here is a goblet, and you shall take two drinks from it, and your companion one drink, and that which is left after shall be left.’ Then Þórir woke up and all these wares which Ágnar gave him were there by his side. Ketilbjörn woke up and he had heard all their conversation, and he had also seen where Agnar went. He asked Þórir to follow this plan. After that Þórir took the goblet and had two drinks from it and Ketilbjörn one. There was still more drink left in the goblet. Þórir raised it to his mouth and drank all. Now sleep overcame them.

Then Agnar came again and rebuked Þórir because he had drunk all the contents of the goblet and said that he would pay for this drink later in his life.)

⁹⁵⁵ *Hallfr* XI, p. 119.

⁹⁵⁶ *Gullþ* III, pp. 185-86.

On this occasion, it is not clear what the contents of the goblet were. However we can assume from the context that it was some sort of supernatural drink that would help Þórir in his quest to break into Valr's cave. It is not clear whether the drink itself was the one that conferred the power (if any) or if it was the goblet that transmitted the might.⁹⁵⁷ However, since the goblet was in the possession of Agnarr's ghost, one can imagine that it was part of the riches that were buried with him in the mound, most probably being of his treasures and thus a rather costly vessel.

The few appearances of goblets in the written sources allow us to draw a few conclusions about their role in the Norse society. First it seems that they were highly appreciated drinking vessels, as in most instances they are said to be made out of precious metals and in one instance of glass. Accordingly they appear in scenes where power and wealth are being displayed. *Kalkr* also seem to be associated with the ruling class as we can see from the majority of the examples given above. They were objects owned and used by kings or earls, and maybe later on by the Church. Finally, and perhaps the strongest evidence of the high regard they enjoyed, we have the fact that they seem to be used almost exclusively for drinking wine.⁹⁵⁸ In general, they seem to have been the most valued drinking vessels portrayed in our literary sources.

KER

The term *ker* is a bit more puzzling than *kalkr* and *kalekr*. The word *ker* can refer both to a tub or vessel as well as to a goblet or cup, and these vessels seem to have been of different qualities and made out of different materials. Thus in the literary corpus we can find references to *ker* (vessel, tub, goblet), an *ausker* (bucket), *qlker* (*ql* vessel), *vínker* (wine vessel), *sýruker* (*sýra* vessel), *skapker* (the large vessel in the hall

⁹⁵⁷ Magic drinks will be discussed in chapter 7.1.

⁹⁵⁸ *Ynglinga saga* is the only occasion in which the beverage served in them is said to be ale.

from which the horns/cups were filled); and based on the materials employed in their fabrication we get the compounds *gullker* (golden vessel) and *silfrker* (silver vessel). Even though they are not literally mentioned in the sources, one should not discard the possibility that some other *ker* were made out of wood or glass. Also, depending on their size and function one can distinguish between a *ker* as a tub or cask and a *drykkjuker* as a *ker* designed specially to drink from rather than as a large container.

The prestige associated with this drinking vessel could also vary, as one cannot expect that a *sýruker* used to serve *sýra* - the most worthless of drinks⁹⁵⁹ - would enjoy the same prestige as a *gullker* or a *vínker* used by the chieftain or farmer to drink the costliest of drinks at a feast. One also should not expect to see wooden and golden *ker* being used in the same context or having the same symbolic meaning as prestigious objects when it comes to a display of power or showing appreciation to a farmer's or chieftain's guests. Let us start our study of these vessels by looking at the occasions on which the word *ker* is used as a simplex and proceed then to the study of the different kinds of *ker*, in descending order of prestige associated with them.

The word *ker* was used indiscriminately both to signify a large container or one that could be used to drink from, it referred both to a tub or a cup. In general it can be considered to mean 'vessel' and its context or prefixed element was what gave it its meaning as well as its value. And, as vessels, it seems that they could come in all sizes. For example, in *Flóamanna saga* we hear about an otherwise unknown kind of duelling. Here we are told that: "*Þá bauð Randviðr Þrándi hólmgöngu, þá er kölluð er kerganga; skal þar berjast í kerri ok byrgja yfir ofan ok hafa kefli í hendi.*"⁹⁶⁰ (Then Randviðr challenged Þrándr to a duel, that which is called *ker*-duel; they should fight inside a *ker* and cover it with a lid and have sticks in their hands.) This must have been quite a large tub so as to be able to accommodate two men armed with staffs and give them enough

⁹⁵⁹ The different types of alcoholic beverages and their connotations are discussed in Chapter 2.

⁹⁶⁰ *Flóam* XVII, p. 264.

space to combat. *Ker* this size were most probably used to store water, as mentioned in *Harðar saga*: “Þorgeir gyrðilskeggi og Sigurðr Torfafóstri fluttu vatn frá Bláskeggsá við tólfta mann og fylltu selabátinn af vatni og helltu í ker það er var út í Hólmi.”⁹⁶¹ (Þorgeirr purse-beard and Sigurðr Torfi’s foster-son moved water from the Bláskeggsá [Black-Beard’s river] with another ten men, and filled a seal boat with water and poured it into that *ker* that was out on Hólmi.) They also seem to have been of a smaller size, so as to be able to keep drinking-water on a ship, while larger amounts were stored in a larger container. In *Eyrbyggja saga*, we have a small but illustrative account of how merchants organized their food and drink needs while on a journey. Regarding the water supply we are told that “skyldu ok allir skiparar eiga drykk saman, ok skyldi ker standa við siglu, er drykkur var í, ok lok yfir kerinu, en sumr drykkur var í verplum, ok var þaðan bætt í kerit, svá sem ór var drukkit.”⁹⁶² (all the sailors should have the same drink, and the *ker* in which the drink was should stand by the mast, and a lid was over the *ker*, and some drink was in casks [*verpill*], from which the *ker* that was used to drink from was refilled.) This kind of container would have been smaller, as the main vessel for water storage was a *verpill*, or cask, while the *ker* in question was most probably bucket-sized. Perhaps the bucket found in the Oseberg ship-burial was a *ker* used for this purpose. Of course we cannot expect every *ker*, as a bucket, to be as highly ornate and prestigious as that found in the royal grave at Oseberg (figure 6.2).

When it comes to those *ker* that were actually used as drinking vessels we have several examples (both in simplex and compound form) throughout the literary sources. On the occasions in which *ker* appear without a prefix, they seem to refer to prestigious and, perhaps, highly ornate vessels used to display wealth and power.

For example *Fóstbræðra saga* narrates the use of several of these vessels during a Yule feast in Greenland:

⁹⁶¹ *Harð XIV*, p. 65.

⁹⁶² *Eb XXXIX*, p. 104.

Þá er at jólum dregr, lætr Þorkell mungát heita, því at hann vill jóladrykkju hafa ok gera sér þat til ágætis, því at sjaldan vǫru drykkjur á Grænlandi. Þorkell bauð þangat vinum sínum at jólum, ok var þar fjqlmennt. Skúfr af Stokkanesi ok Bjarni vǫru þar um jólin. Þaðan var haför húsbúnaður ok ker ok klæði um jólin. Nú drukku menn um jólin með mikilli gleði ok skemmtan. Affaradag jólanna bjuggusk menn á brott. Loðinn greiddi mǫnnum klæði, sverð ok handagörvi, er hann hafði varðveitt; hann setti ok fram skip þeirra Skúfs ok Bjarna. Húskarlar báru ofan ker ok klæði.⁹⁶³

(Then when Yule approached Þorkell brewed *mungát* because he wanted to hold a Yule-drinking and as a glory to himself, because there were hardly ever drinks in Greenland. Þorkell invited his friends for Yule, and the place was full of people. Skúfr from Stokaness and Bjarni were there during Yule. They took their furniture and *ker* and tapestries with them. Now men drank during Yule with much joy and amusement. The last day of the Yule feast the men got ready to go away. Loðinn gave their clothes, swords and gloves to the men, those which he had been looking after; he also brought and set the ship of Skúfr and Bjarni. The servants brought down the *ker* and the tapestries.)

This passage is highly illustrative of how holding a feast could increase a man's power and/or reputation. We are first told that Þorkell hosts a feast for all his friends in Greenland. However his purpose is not only to provide entertainment but to do it for his glory, and for that sole purpose he brews *mungát*, since offering a commodity rarely available in Greenland would definitely prove that he is a *ríkr maðr*. However, it seems that the simple offering of alcohol was not enough to increase his fame; it had to be provided in the right setting and with the proper paraphernalia that would prove to his friends that he is powerful and, hence, a suitable candidate to be a leader of men. The only problem seems to be that, apart from alcohol and a hall, he lacks the implements of display. Hence he has to borrow this gear: furniture, tapestries and goblets. Perhaps in order to disguise the fact that all these luxury items were borrowed, Þorkell decides to hand them back once all the guests had left the feast.

To distinguish between *ker* in general and other *ker* that were used specifically for drinking purposes, a prefix was sometimes added. So we have compounds of *ker* such as *drykkjuker* (drinking-*ker*), *borðker* (table-*ker*), and *skapker* (a large *ker* from which other *ker* were filled)

⁹⁶³ *Fbr* XXII, pp. 226-27.

The *drykkjuker* (drinking-ker) is mentioned only in one instance in the literary sources. This is in a royal setting, in *Víglundar saga*, when King Haraldr attends a feast arranged by Sigurðr. The feast is arranged properly for a king, and the saga reports that “*þessi veizla var vönduð mjök at öllum füngum.*”⁹⁶⁴ (this feast was carefully prepared with all means.) The king designates a man called Þorgrímr as his and his men’s cup-bearer, and the cup being used was a large *drykkjuker* (drinking-ker) for we are told that “*Þorgrímr bar eitt stórt drykkjuker fyrir Grím, þá stöplaðist út af kerinu, því at Þorgrímr drap við fæti, ok kom á klæði Gríms.*”⁹⁶⁵ (Þorgrímr carried a large drinking vessel for Grímr, then little was spilt out of the *ker* because Þorgrímr stumbled and it was spattered over Grímr’s clothes.) Once again, the vessel used at the feast must have been a quite ornate one, so as to be fitting not only with the standing of the king and his men who are being served in it, but also with the lavish way in which the feast is said to be prepared. We are not told if they were made out of glass or precious metals.

Borðker (table-ker) are mentioned only in four sources,⁹⁶⁶ two of which are of dubious historical trustworthiness, but can still provide us with an idea of how the saga writers perceived the *ker* in the legendary past. The first occurrence of a *borðker* is that of the legendary *Bósa saga* mentioned at the beginning of this section. As we have already seen, this *borðker* is made out of a vulture’s egg⁹⁶⁷ “*at skrifat er allt með gullstöfum.*”⁹⁶⁸ (which is inscribed all over with golden letters) and “*var þar i tíu merkr gulls, ok hafði konungr skurnit fyrir borðker.*”⁹⁶⁹ (was worth ten marks of gold; and the king used the egg-shell as a table-ker.) The shape of the egg may well resemble that of a cup. Perhaps the story of the vulture and about how the drinking vessel was obtained was, as earlier discussed, a story made up in order to enhance the honour of a highly

⁹⁶⁴ *Vígl* V, p. 69.

⁹⁶⁵ *Vígl* V, p. 69.

⁹⁶⁶ *Bós* IX, *Vqls* XXIV and XXXVIII, *ÓHCXC* and *ÓK* III.

⁹⁶⁷ The vulture is not a scavenging bird native to Iceland, hence it was easily made into an animal worthy of legendary adventures.

⁹⁶⁸ *Bós* VI, p. 296.

⁹⁶⁹ *Bós* IX, p. 304.

decorated and already prestigious vessel by attributing it a legendary origin.⁹⁷⁰ As we will see, when it comes to drinking horns, there were stories about bulls whose horns were decorated with gold, most probably to justify a mythic origin of a pair of drinking vessels. In this case we would have an equivalent, where a cracked egg-shell would also produce a pair of drinking vessels that are said to be golden in nature.

The other two occurrences of a table-*ker* in the *Fornaldar sǫgur* take place in *Vǫlsunga saga*. In the first instance, they are mentioned in a royal setting, when Brynhildr welcomes Sigurðr to her place. Then “*ganga þar inn fjórar konur með stórum borðkerum af gulli ok með hinu bezta vini ok standa fyrir þeim.*”⁹⁷¹ (four women went in with a large golden table-*ker* and with the best wine and stood before them.) They seem to have been highly prestigious vessels, not only because they were used to serve the best of wines, but because in the ideology of the saga composers (and perhaps of the audience too) they were the proper drinking vessels used to honour the best known heroes of the legendary past.⁹⁷²

Borðker appear in a more historical context in Snorri Sturluson’s *Heimskringla*. In *Óláfs saga kyrra* Snorri tells us how *borðker* replaced drinking horns as the drinking vessel befitting kings.

*Óláfr konungr hafði þá hirðsiðu, at hann lét standa fyrir borði sinu skutilsveina ok skenkja sér með borðkerum ok svá qllum tignum mǫnnum, þeim er at hans borði sátu. [...] Haraldr konungr ok aðrir konungar fyrir honum vǫru vanir at drekka af dýrahornum ok bera ql ór qndugi um eld ok drekka minni á þann, er honum sýndist.*⁹⁷³

(King Óláfr had then the court tradition of having a cup-bearer standing in front of his table and serving him and all the honourable men that were sitting with him at the table with table-*ker* [...] King Haraldr⁹⁷⁴ and all the other kings before him were accustomed to drink out of animal horns and

⁹⁷⁰ “In England between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries, ‘grypeseye,’ or griffin eggs, were highly prized collectibles, listed in the inventories of noble houses and often made into cups in which beverages thought to possess powerful health-giving qualities were brewed.” David E. Jones, *An Instinct for Dragons* (New York: Routledge, 2000). p 146.

⁹⁷¹ *Vǫls* XXIV, p. 167.

⁹⁷² The second occasion on which a *borðker* is mentioned in *Vǫls* is when Guðrún turns the skulls of her and Atli’s boys into drinking vessels. (*Vǫls* XXXVIII, p. 211) While in verse these vessels were called *kalkr*, as we saw above in the section devoted to *kalkr*, the saga names them as *borðker*.

⁹⁷³ *ÓK* III, p. 205-6.

⁹⁷⁴ That is Haraldr Sigurðsson, his predecessor to the Norwegian throne.

to have their ale served at the high-seat from around the fireplace and drink toasts to whom they wished.)

Taking into account that Óláfr *kyrre* ruled Norway from 1067 until 1093, some 80 years before the birth of Snorri Sturluson, we can consider these events to have reached Snorri orally and to contain, perhaps, a kernel of truth. Again, this account seems to confirm that *borðker* were vessels refined enough for kings to drink from. However, some 40 to 50 years before Óláfr *kyrre* introduced the custom of drinking from *borðker*, we find in *Óláfs saga Helga* that Saint Óláfr had already started using them at his high-seat.⁹⁷⁵ Snorri tells us that “á einum sunnudegi, at Óláfr konungr sat í háseti sínu yfir borðum ok hafði svá fasta áhyggju, at hann gáði eigi stundanna. Hann hafði í hendi knif ok hélt á tannar ok renndi þar af spánu nakkura. Skutilsveinn stóð fyrir honum ok hélt borðkeri.”⁹⁷⁶ [during one Sunday when King Óláfr sat on his high-seat at the table and was so absorbed in his thoughts that he did not notice the time. He had a knife in his hand and remained silent and was there making chips of wood. The cup-bearer stood in front of him and held a loving-cup.] In case Snorri’s comment about Óláfr *kyrre* is accurate, then Saint Óláfr’s use of *borðker* may be interpreted as an anachronism on the part of the author. However, this anachronism might have been due to the fact that Snorri knew about the prestige associated with *borðker* use and wanted to transmit it to Saint Óláfr by depicting him as drinking from one.

From the few examples of the use of a *borðker* we can gather that they were highly appreciated drinking vessels as they all appear in a courtly context. Also, the examples of *Vqlsunga saga* XXIV and those of *Heimskringla* coincide in a different aspect. In all these scenes, a cup-bearer is introduced to hold the table-*ker* for the person who is drinking from it. Perhaps this was another way of displaying power. But from these passages we can also gather that *borðker* had some degree of dignity in themselves, so that they required the service of a person “specialized” in holding them.

⁹⁷⁵ Seats at the hall and heir social connotations will be studied in section 6.2.2.

⁹⁷⁶ *ÓHCXC*, p. 342.

This dignity imbued in the ritual of drinking from such vessels was most probably also transferred to the person drinking from it.

The word *borðker* means, etymologically, ‘table-vessel’, and it is interesting that in none of the examples do we actually see a *borðker* lying on the table. Perhaps this meaning of “table-vessel” originated and applied to less refined and daily-use drinking vessel to be found at farms and not in courts. This kind of drinking vessel would most probably be so ordinary as to escape any mention in the literature.

Other *ker* made out of gold⁹⁷⁷ and silver⁹⁷⁸ are mentioned in the literary sources, and apart from that made out of an egg-shell, these are the only materials they seem to be made of in the literature. We cannot discard the possibility that *ker* were also made out of glass, soapstone or wood; but, for some reason they were not considered to be worthy of mention in the literature.

Based on the contents of these vessels, we find the compounds *qlker* (ale-*ker*)⁹⁷⁹ and *sýruker*⁹⁸⁰ (*sýra-ker*); however references to *qlker* do not refer to a drinking vessel but to a large tub and to piglets in a riddle on another occasion. In *Vqlsunga saga*, both Sigmundr and Sinfjqtli hide in the antechamber of King Siggeirr in order to seek revenge. The story goes that they: “*ganga inn í forstofuna, þá er var fyrir höllinni, en þar váru inni ölker, og leynast þar.*”⁹⁸¹ (go into the antechamber that was in front of the hall, and there were ale-*ker*, and they hid there.) Similarly, *Orkneyinga saga* reports *qlker* large dimensions: “*ölker bæði mörg ok stór.*”⁹⁸² (a great number of large ale-*ker*.) The third occurrence of this compound is as part of a riddle told by Óðinn to Heiðrekr:

“*Sá ek á sumri sólbjörgum á,*

⁹⁷⁷ *Gullker*. See *Vqls* XXIV and *ÞórstBm* X.

⁹⁷⁸ *Silfrker*. See *ÞórstBm* II.

⁹⁷⁹ *OrðT* does not return any entries for the term *qlker*, meaning that it is not mentioned at all in the *Islendinga sǫgur*. It is not found in the *Sturlunga saga* nor in the *Fornaldarsǫgur*. *ONP* returns several entries for this term, but, since the project is still unfinished, it does not mention where are they found. In any case, we are certain that they are not to be found in the sagas.

⁹⁸⁰ *OrðT* provides 4 different entries for the term *sýruker*. One in *Eg* and three in *Gisl* (of which one is repeated). These are the examples discussed below. See *OrðT*, *sýruker*.

⁹⁸¹ *Vqls* VIII, p. 125.

⁹⁸² *Orkn* LXVI, p. 152.

<i>bað ek vel lifa</i>	<i>vilgi teiti,</i>
<i>drukku jarlar</i>	<i>öl þegjandi,</i>
<i>en æpanda</i>	<i>ölker stóð.</i>
<i>Heiðrekr konungr,</i>	<i>hyggðu at gátu.”⁹⁸³</i>

(I saw it in the summer during the sunset, / I would say lively and very cheerful, / the earls drank ale in silence / and screaming stood the ale-ker. / King Heiðrekr do you think you get it?)⁹⁸⁴

The compound *sýruker* also seems to be used for large containers of *sýra* rather than drinking vessels. In *Egils saga*, a *sýruker* is used to dispose of a shield⁹⁸⁵ while in *Gísla saga*, two *sýruker* are used as a hiding place.⁹⁸⁶ In the *Sturlunga saga* compilation they are mentioned just once, also as a hiding place.⁹⁸⁷ As these are the only occurrences of these compounds in our written sources,⁹⁸⁸ one may be well justified in assuming that both *sýruker* and *qlker* do not refer to drinking vessels but to large containers for those drinks. Perhaps, after all, the *ker* as a drinking vessel was used especially for more costly drinks such as wine and appeared only in high-status settings while horns or less refined cups were used for *ql*, *mungát*, and *sýra*.

SKÁLIR AND ÁSKR

The drinking vessel most commonly associated with *ql*, *mungát* and *bjórr* is the drinking-horn. However in the Eddic literature we find evidence of another kind of vessel that seems to be exclusively linked to the consumption of *ql*, at least

⁹⁸³ *Heiðr X*, p. 48.

⁹⁸⁴ The answer to this riddle is ‘a sow feeding her piglets’. The piglets drink in silence while the sow squeals.

⁹⁸⁵ See *Eg LXXVIII*, p. 273.

⁹⁸⁶ See *Gísl III*, p. 12.

⁹⁸⁷ *Ísl CLXXIV*, pp. 492-93.

⁹⁸⁸ The *ONP* online entry for *qlker* reports six instances of the use of the word; however, since the project is not yet complete, they are not provided. *OrðT* does not provide any examples. *IED* provides four examples, three of which are mentioned above. The fourth corresponds to *Stjórn*, the Old Norse version of the *Old Testament* and not included in our sources. The *ONP* entry for *sýruker* returns eight instances of the use of this compound, but they are not listed. Four of these examples should be equivalent to the four provided by *OrðT*, quoted above (the compound occurs 3 times in *Gísl* and once in *Eg*) and three equivalent with the three times that the word is used in the passage of *Ísl* mentioned above. The eight and last example, not listed in the *ONP*, should be that in *Biskupa sqgur*, which do not form part of our primary sources.

etymologically, named *qlskálr*⁹⁸⁹ [*ql*-cup]. So, in *Atlakviða* it is said that: “*umðo qlscálr Atla, vínhqfgar.*”⁹⁹⁰ (the ale-cups of Atli resounded, heavy with wine.) While in *Atlamál*, as we have seen earlier in this section, it is said that the boys’ skulls are used as *qlskalir*: “*hausu veiz þú þeira hafða at qlscálo.*”⁹⁹¹ (their skulls, you know, you had as ale-cups.) Even if on both occasions the vessels are said to be used for drinking wine instead of *ql*, we can at least conclude from the first element of the compound that there was one period in the history of these vessels in which they were mainly used for drinking *ql*. Another possibility is that the choice of drink to be served in these cups was conditioned by the poets’ rhyming and alliterating needs more than by the actual liquid poured into them. Or maybe, originally, the cups in the story were used to drink *ql*, but later on, as wine took the leading place of honour among beverages the drinks were altered in order to befit the status of the drinkers.

The last occurrence of this compound word is that in *Hamðismál* where during a battle it is simply stated that “*stýrr varð í ranni, stucco qlscálr*”⁹⁹² (tumultuous it became in the longhouse/ the *ql*-cups sprang.). But since we are not told what was drunk from these vessels, we cannot ascertain that they were used for *ql*, as their name suggests.

Finally, the least prestigious of vessels might be the *skyraskr* [*skyr*-bowl]. As the second element ‘*askr*’ (ash) suggests, this was a wooden bowl. Wooden bowls or *askr* were most certainly one of the most common vessels that a Norse man or woman would use on a daily basis. However they are rarely mentioned -only in one source- and on this occasion they are related to the lowest of drinks, *skyr*.⁹⁹³ In *Egils saga*, we are told that Egill is travelling in the middle of winter representing the Norwegian King on some

⁹⁸⁹ These occur in *Akv* 34, *Am* 79 and *Hm* 23.

⁹⁹⁰ *Akv* 34.

⁹⁹¹ *Am* 82.

⁹⁹² *Hm* 23.

⁹⁹³ See *ONP*, *askr*. The word is used to name the tree or any objects made out of its wood, including drinking vessels. However the only instances in which it is used to name a drinking vessel or measure are those mentioned in Chapter 2, and the only instance in which an *askr* is named in connection with a drink is that in *Eg*.

errands. At some point Egill and his men have to ask for shelter at the farm of a man called Ármóðr where they are welcomed in the following fashion: “Ármóðr lét þá setja þeim borð, en síðan váru settir fram stórir askar, fullir af skyrri; þá lét Ármóðr, at honum þætti þat illa, er hann hafði eigi mungát at gefa þeim.”⁹⁹⁴ (Ármóðr then had the tables set, and afterwards big bowls full of *skyr* were set in front of them; then Ármóðr let them think that he thought it bad that he had no *mungát* to offer them.) After the king’s men have been drinking *skyr* for a while, they find out that it was all treachery, and that Ármóðr actually had some better drink to offer them. Then they left the *skyr* as “því næst var ql inn borit, ok var þat it sterkasta mungát; var þá brátt drukkinn einmenningr; skyldi einn maðr drekka af dýrshorni.”⁹⁹⁵ (afterwards ql was brought in, and it was the strongest kind of *mungát*, the drinking was then done without men sharing a vessel, each man could drink alone from his animal-horn.) This passage is quite illustrative in the sense that it allows us to understand the value of each drink as well as that of the vessels they were served in. First of all we have a group of men representing the king on a mission, and as the king’s representatives they should expect treatment similar to that which the king would get from the farmers. When asked for shelter, the farmer pretends that he has nothing other than *skyr* to offer, which is accepted by the men, as they believe that the farmer is giving them the best of his provisions. As the *skyr* is said to be served in large bowls, we can suppose that the men were actually sharing the vessels in which the *skyr* was served. However, as soon as the king’s emissaries find out that there were better provisions to be had, they feel offended and demand them. The offence consisted in offering a beverage that was below their status while he actually had something better to offer. He gave them a slave’s or low-class people’s drink, which means that in the perception of the farmer they were lower-class men, undeserving of his best victuals. This offence extends, of course, to the king,

⁹⁹⁴ Eg LXXI, p. 224.

⁹⁹⁵ Eg LXXI, p. 225.

whom they are representing. Once the trick is discovered and the offence made clear the farmer tries to compensate by offering the best of drinks available. Not only do the contents improve, but there is also a change of vessels to drinking horns. And there is now one horn-per-person in contrast with the large bowls that they had to share before. We can also perceive that there is a vessel appropriate for each drink. While *sýra* is served in an *askr*, *mungát* is offered in a *horn* as it is a vessel more befitting to the social status of the drink. Similarly, wine was never offered in a *horn*, as the vessels that corresponded to its status were the *kalkr* and those *ker* that were highly ornated or made out of a precious metal.

6.3 - *MANNJAFNADAR*, BOASTING AND DRINKING CONTESTS

Feasts and gatherings in general offered an opportunity for men to meet and socialize and, at the same time, they offered the possibility for men to boast and compare their deeds and prowess with those of other men of the same or similar rank. This form of showing-off led to a kind of competition known as *mannjafnaðr* (a comparison of men) and is “a dispute in which each contends that his hero is the greatest.”⁹⁹⁶ This dispute could in some cases be between men of opposing groups, who maintained that a person in their band had better qualities than the best man in the opposing group. But the *mannjafnaðr* could also take place between two or more men, friends or not, who boast about their own qualities and deeds at the same time that they ridicule the accomplishments of the opponent. Lars Lönnroth correctly asserts that:

Regarded primarily as a ‘party game’ the *mannjafnaðr* is a battle of wits, in which the contestants take turn in making boasts and insulting each other according to certain formal rules. The fun of the game consists in finding witty and formally correct repartees, matching the opponent’s previous boast while at the same time turning it to ridicule.

⁹⁹⁶ IED, *mannjafnaðr*.

As a literary motif, on the other hand, the *mannjafnaðr* is used to bring out the differences in character between two warriors and to prepare for the revelation of some hero's true identity.⁹⁹⁷

William Ian Miller defines it in a similar fashion as:

It [*mannjafnaðr*] was the term for a quasi-formal contest, a kind of slanging match, which seemed to figure largely at feasts, especially when people were in good spirits with drink. The game was to choose the best man in the district, town, or hall; it was, in short, our ranking game of who's the smartest, prettiest, sexiest, coolest, best athlete, least sexually attractive.⁹⁹⁸

Mannjafnaðar did not take place exclusively in a drinking setting, as they could be held at any place where large numbers of people gathered, such as the privy or at an assembly.⁹⁹⁹ Perhaps the association of the 'game' with a drinking context comes from an episode found in *Heimskringla*. There, in *Magnússona saga*, King Eysteinn and King Sigurðr alternately exchange visits to entertain each other. But during a certain evening “*er menn tóku at drekka, þá var mungát ekki gott, ok váru menn hljóðir.*”¹⁰⁰⁰ (when the men started to drink the *mungát* was not good and all the men were taciturn.) When boredom becomes unbearable for the attendants King Eysteinn comes with an idea to save the night, and proposes a game: “*Sá qlsiðr hefir opt verit, at menn taka sér jafnaðarmenn. Vil ek hér svá vera láta.*”¹⁰⁰¹ (It has often been an *ql*-custom for men to find an equal match for themselves. I want that to be done here.) The competition starts when King Eysteinn names his brother, King Sigurðr, as his opponent and the *mannjafnaðr* takes place in the following fashion:

‘Mun ek taka þik bróðir til jafnaðarmanns mér. Færi ek þat til at jafnt nafn hqfum vit báðir ok jafna eign. Geri ek engi mun ættar okkarrar eða uppfæzlu.’ Þá svarar Sigurðr konungr: ‘Mantu eigi þat, er ek braut þik á bak, ef ek vilda, ok vartu vetri ellri?’ Þá svarar Eysteinn konungr: ‘Eigi man ek hitt síðr, er þú fékkt eigi leikit þat, er mjúkleikr var í.’ Þá mælti Sigurðr konungr: ‘Mantu, hversu fór um sundit með okkr? Ek mätta keffa þik, ef ek vilda.’¹⁰⁰²

⁹⁹⁷ Lönnroth, ‘Double Scene’, p. 97.

⁹⁹⁸ Miller, p. 174.

⁹⁹⁹ The *mannjafnaðar*, in a legal context, consisted in comparing corpses of men belonging to opposing bands, killed in a feud, in order to calculate the compensation owed by one part to the other. For example, see *Heið XXXVI* and *GrønI VI*. However, for the purposes of this study I will limit the study of *mannjafnaðar* to a comparison of men within a drinking setting. For an analysis of *mannjafnaðar* as a legal procedure see Miller, pp. 109-29.

¹⁰⁰⁰ *Magn XXI*, p. 259.

¹⁰⁰¹ *Magn XXI*, p. 259.

¹⁰⁰² *Magn XXI*, p. 259.

(‘I will take you, brother, as my equal-man. I’ll start by saying that we both have an equal name (title) and equal estates. I don’t find any difference in our birth or in our upbringing.’ Then King Sigurðr answers: ‘Don’t you remember when I used to break your back [at wrestling] if I wanted, and you were a winter older?’ Then King Eysteinn says: ‘I don’t remember the less that you got a single game in which you were the most agile.’ Then King Sigurðr said: ‘Do you remember how it used to go in swimming [contests] between us? I could immerse you in the water if I wanted.’]

The series of boasts continues increasing, and goes from sports to personal appearance, political abilities, etc. and it ends only when both kings become furious: “*Eptir þat þqgnuðu þeir báðir, ok var hvártveggi reiðr. Fleiri hlutir urðu þeir í skiptum þeira bræðra, er þat fannsk á, at hvárr dró sik fram ok sitt mál ok vildi hvárr vera qðrum meiri, en helzk þó friðr milli þeirra, meðan þeir lifðu.*”¹⁰⁰³ (After that they both became silent and both of them were angry. Several things happened in the exchange between the brothers when it could be perceived how each brought himself and his speech forward, and each one wanted to be greater than the other. However there was peace between them while they lived.)

The fact that King Eysteinn refers to the comparison of men as an *qlsiðr* (ale-custom) most surely means that *mannjafnaðar* are considered a drinking game, regardless of the fact that drinking is not mentioned at all in this scene. However, since the event takes place within a drinking hall, even if it is a hall provided with bad *mungát*, one can well imagine that the series of boasts took place while the contestants drank. But, at least according to the narration in *Magnússona saga*, alcohol does not seem to play an active role in this ale-custom. Another scene that mentions *mannjafnaðar* as an entertainment to be had at large gatherings or during feasts comes from *Svarföæla saga*. Here, on the occasion of a wedding feast¹⁰⁰⁴ Griss makes the following speech: “*Vel samir þat í svá góðu samsæti at tala mest þat, er eptir megi hafa, ok strengja heit eða taka sér jafnaðarmenn.*’ Þorsteinn sagði þat óvitrlega til

¹⁰⁰³ *Magn XXI*, p. 262.

¹⁰⁰⁴ Wedding feasts are discussed in Chapter 5.

lagit.”¹⁰⁰⁵ (It is fitting at such a fine gathering to talk about great deeds that are worth of remembrance, and to make oaths or find ones equal [i.e. entering a *mannjafnaðr* contest].’ Þorsteinn said that it was a foolish thing to do.) Once more we can see that *mannjafnaðar* and oath-making, by which men could prove their worthiness, were considered as activities that took place at large gatherings such as feasts, where alcohol was consumed. Þorstein’s words, saying that such competitions are not advisable may spring from the fact that these competitions, instead of creating a sense of unity within the group, led to hard feelings within the contestants and their supporters. This could be dangerous, as “ranking demoralizes losers more than it exalts winners.”¹⁰⁰⁶ Taking into consideration that these comparisons were between the best or most powerful men in the district then, as will be discussed later in the section, if the loser did not take his defeat with humour, his sense of humiliation could lead to a series of killings or feuds.

Basically, the contest consists of men showing-off their prowess while minimizing and ridiculing the physical, intellectual, martial and moral qualities and achievements of the opponent. In other words, this ale-custom is an intellectual battle whose objective is for one man to prove that he is more powerful than the other. Perhaps that is why the contest opens with a statement of ‘equality’ between the contenders, as only a contest between men of similar status would guarantee a fair duel; it would be meaningless to make a comparison between men of different standing.

There seem to be three possible endings for this kind of “game”, depending on who participates in it and on whether alcohol plays an active role or not in the *mannjafnaðar*. When the contest is a confrontation between the actual men that are being compared it normally ends when one of the contenders runs out of achievements to boast of. A second variant is when drinking takes an active part in the competition. In that case it ends either when one contender outdrinks the other or when one runs out of

¹⁰⁰⁵ *Svarfd* XVI, p. 165.

¹⁰⁰⁶ Miller, p. 177.

deeds to boast of. The third possibility occurs when the competition takes place between a group of people who are comparing two or more men that are not present at the debate. In this last case it ends when a person brings out irrefutable evidence that proves that his candidate is the man with the most outstanding profile. Regardless of who participates in the competition, and of the active or passive role of alcohol in it, in most cases the outcome is a sense of enmity between the men being compared. This might be due both to the hard feelings generated by the exchange of public humiliations that the sides have to deal with as well as to the sense of being a lesser man that accompanies the loser at the end of the game. A good example of how such games could end in a killing comes from *Eyrbyggja saga*. In it a group of men try to find out who is the best man in the district. The saga reads:

Annat haust eptir at vetrnóttum hafði Snorri goði haustboð mikit ok bauð til vinum sínum. Þar var qldrykkja ok fast drukkit. Þar var qlteiti mqrq; var þar talat um mannjqfnuð, hverr þar væri gqfgastr maðr í sveit eða mestr hqfðingi; ok urðu menn þar eigi á eitt sáttir, sem optast er, ef um mannjqfnuð er talat; váru þeir flestir, at Snorri goði þótti gqfgastr maðr, en sumir nefndu til Arnkel; þeir váru enn sumir, er nefndu til Styr.¹⁰⁰⁷

(The following autumn, during the winter nights, Snorri the *goði* held a great autumn feast and he invited his friends to attend. There was *ql*-drinking and people drank heavily. There was a great *ql*-entertainment; there was talking about comparison of people (*mannjafnaðr*), about who was the most eminent man or the greatest chieftain in the district; and the people in there were not of one opinion, as it usually happens when there is a comparison of men; the most of them thought that Snorri the *goði* was the most eminent man, and some named Arnkell; there were still some that named Styr.)

When the comparison of men starts people cannot reach an agreement about who is the most eminent man. But the discussion comes to an end when a man states that “*engir liggja heimamenn Arnkels ógildir hjá garði hans, þeir er Snorri hefir drepit, sem Haukr, fylgðarmaðr Snorra, liggr hér hjá garði hans, er Arnkell hefir drepit.*”¹⁰⁰⁸ (none of Arnkell’s household lies, killed by Snorri, near his garth and without compensation in the same way that Haukr, Snorri’s follower, lies here near the yard killed by Arnkell.)

¹⁰⁰⁷ *Eb* XXXVII, p. 98.

¹⁰⁰⁸ *Eb* XXXVII, p. 99.

This statement is enough to bring the *mannjafnaðr* to an end, as it proves Snorri's inferiority since he has not avenged his follower. As soon as Snorri hears the verdict he tries to bring back balance and prove himself as the most powerful by killing Arnkell. "This comparison of men ends because one interpreter of men's deeds has asserted an interpretation with which all agree. Snorri must now act, create new facts which interpreters may use in comparative duels, in order to maintain status."¹⁰⁰⁹

This scene also takes place in a heavy-drinking context and the *mannjafnaðr* is, just as in *Magnússona saga*, considered a sort of *qlteit* [*ql*-entertainment]. But, just as in *Magnússona saga*, drinking does not seem to have an important role in the contest. According to Karen Swenson's study on *mannjafnaðar* and *sennur*, there are eight self-described occurrences of *mannjafnaðar* in the literary corpus, of which only five take place in a hall where men are drinking.¹⁰¹⁰ These are, apart from the two already mentioned, that in *Ólafs saga Helga* CXLI, *Orkneyinga saga* XXXIV and *Flóamanna saga* XXV. However this last occurrence cited by Swenson actually takes place while a group of men are sitting in the toilet, as both the Long and Short versions of the text clearly state that it takes place while "*menn sátu í náðahúsi í Brattahlíð*"¹⁰¹¹ (men sat in the privy in Brattahlíð) and "*menn sátu í heimilishúsi þar í Brattahlíð*"¹⁰¹² (men sat in the closet there in Brattahlíð) and it is not stated if this took place after drinking. To complicate the matter, the *mannjafnaðar* in *Ólafs saga Helga* and *Orkneyinga saga* also take place while drinking, but alcohol does not seem to play an active role in the contest. So, why are the *mannjafnaðar* alluded to as an *qlsiðr* (*ql*-custom) or *qlteit* (*ql*-entertainment)? What is the role alcohol plays in them? First of all we could say that the *mannjafnaðar* were just a game to keep people entertained while drinking, without the need for the drink to play a part in the game. Nonetheless, alcohol may have played an

¹⁰⁰⁹ Karen Swenson, *Performing Definitions: Two Genres of Insult in Old Norse Literature*, *Studies in Scandinavian Literature and Culture*, 3 (Columbia, S.C.: Camden House, 1991), p. 46.

¹⁰¹⁰ Swenson, p. 44.

¹⁰¹¹ *Flóam* XXV, p. 304. Long version after AM445 b, 4to.

¹⁰¹² *Flóam* XXV, p. 304. Short version after AM 516, 4to.

important, if not active, role in these comparisons of men. After all, the literary sources show that it was important for men to know how to drink in moderation, to know how not to ‘drink their wits out of themselves’ for that impairs not only their perception of reality but also their verbal skills.¹⁰¹³ So, in contests of wits, such as *mannjafnaðar*, it must have been of utter importance to remain sober so as to not exaggerate or boast of deeds that had not been achieved, for that would put the contestant in ridicule and be added as a point against him.¹⁰¹⁴ One can also mention that if the game takes place while drinking, men should have also made a point of their prominence by displaying a great deal of alcohol tolerance that allows them to outdrink the opponent and prove themselves as role-models of sobriety, which is yet another asset that the best of men can boast of.

These ideas seem to be confirmed in *Qrvar-Odds saga* in a scene that is not defined as a *mannjafnaðr*, but shows traces of being a combination of a *mannjafnaðr* and a *senna*. A *senna* or “gibing or jibing”¹⁰¹⁵ is another form of verbal confrontation between two or more people. As Lars Lonnröth puts it:

The *senna* is a competitive exchange of boasts and insults, while the *mannjafnaðr* is a somewhat more formalized version of the same sport, usually taking place at the drinking table and sometimes referred to as *qlteiti*, ‘beer entertainment’, in which case it may be combined with a drinking contest. The *senna* and the *mannjafnaðr* are similar enough to be treated as more or less identical.¹⁰¹⁶

The purpose of the *senna* is, however, to discredit the adversary while that of the *mannjafnaðr* is to find who is the best of two or more men, without necessarily aiming to disqualify any of them. In addition, the *senna* does not involve a boast on the side of any of the adversaries, it consists more in the utterance of a series of reciprocal disqualifications and insults. A further difference is that in the *senna*,

¹⁰¹³ The role of alcohol as an instrument of power and deception is studied in section 7.2.

¹⁰¹⁴ As we will see further down in this section, oath-swearing was the contest in which men could boast about deeds that, even if they had not yet achieved them, they considered themselves capable to accomplish.

¹⁰¹⁵ *IED*, *senna*.

¹⁰¹⁶ Lonnroth, ‘Double Scene’, p. 97.

the contestants are not potentially equals, and they do not compare themselves with each other. The *senna* exchange is not simply a comparison of relative 'goodness'. The participants do not assess 'manliness' against an agreed upon standard; they are not members of the same social group; they do not share, even as fictional agreement, a definition of 'good behaviour'.¹⁰¹⁷

The drinking scene in chapter XXVII of *Qrvar-Odds saga* is then, according to the previous definitions, a mixture between a *mannjafnaðr* and a *senna* as the men who participate in the drinking contest are not of equal standing as well as due to the fact that two men's deeds are being contrasted with those of one. But in every other sense it can be well considered as a *mannjafnaðr*. In it Sigurðr and Sjólftr enter into a drinking contest with Qrvar-Oddr, a legendary hero already in his own time, who disguises himself as a low caste vagrant at the palace of the King of Gotland. On his arrival in Gotland, Qrvar-Oddr asks for information about the king and the most prominent men in the court:

*'Hvat er göfugra manna með honum?' sagði Oddr.
'Þar eru tveir menn,' sagði karl, 'ok heitir annarr Sigurðr, en annarr Sjólftr. Þeir eru öndvegishöldar konungs ok inir mestu bardagamenn.'*¹⁰¹⁸

(‘Who are the worshipful men with him [i.e. with the king]?’ said Oddr. ‘There are two men’ said the man ‘and one is called Sigurðr and the other Sjólftr. They sit in the bench opposite to the King’s throne and they are the greatest warriors.’)

The description of Sigurðr and Sjólftr contrasts with that of Qrvar-Oddr; he appears as a vagrant covered in bark who is assigned a sitting place in the lower bench, between the freed-men and the slaves. Still the two men enter a drinking contest against Qrvar-Oddr, which consists of him proving that he can drink and boast of more deeds than the two of them together. The contest takes place in the following fashion: both Sigurðr and Sjólftr must take a drinking horn each to Qrvar-Oddr and, after he has quaffed them, they must recite one boastful stanza each, praising their deeds and minimising those of Oddr. Afterwards Qrvar-Oddr must carry two drinking horns to where Sigurðr and Sjólftr are sitting. They must quaff a horn each and Oddr must, in his turn, recite two boastful

¹⁰¹⁷ Swenson, p. 54.

¹⁰¹⁸ *Qrv* XXIV, p. 300.

stanzas.¹⁰¹⁹ The contest goes on like this, each side delivering two stanzas and quaffing two horns, for three rounds. Then after having recited his two stanzas “*Oddr settist nú niðr, en þeir færa honum horn ok fylgir engi kveðskapr. Hann drekkur af, en þeir setjast niðr. Ok nú færir Oddr þeim horn ok kvað þetta*”¹⁰²⁰ (Oddr sits down, and they brought him the horns and delivered no poetry. He drinks them, and they sat down. And now Oddr brings them the horns and recited this) after which he recites his two stanzas. The game goes on like this for yet another four rounds, with Oddr emptying two horns and reciting two stanzas while Sigurðr and Sjólftr only drink up their horns but deliver no poetry at all. After these four rounds “*Konungsmenn hlýða skemmtan þeira. Enn færa þeir Oddi hornin, ok vinnr hann skjótt um þau bæði. Eftir þat riss Oddr upp ok gengr fyrir þá ok þykkist vita, at nú sigr at þeim drykkjunn ok allt saman, at þeir váru fyrir lagðir í skáldskapnum.*”¹⁰²¹ (The king’s men listen to the entertainment. And they [Sigurðr and Sjólftr] took Oddr the horns and he quaffed them both. After that Oddr rises up and goes towards them and he realizes that they are conquered by the drink and at the same time that they were beyond composing poetry.) After this he recites a further six stanzas about his deeds. The end result is that “*þeir bræðr fellu þar sofnir niðr, ok varð nú ekki af þeim meira um drykkjuna, en Oddr drekkur lengi, ok eftir þat leggjast menn niðr ok sváfu af nóttina*”¹⁰²² (the brothers fell asleep there and they had nothing more to do with the drink; on the other hand Oddr stayed drinking for a long while, and after that the men went to bed and slept through the night) and Qrvar-Oddr is the clear winner of the contest.

It might seem bizarre that the two most prominent men of Gotland (who sit opposite the King at the table) enter into a *mannjafnaðr* with a vagrant (who sits

¹⁰¹⁹ See Qrv XXVII.

¹⁰²⁰ Qrv XXVII, p. 315.

¹⁰²¹ Qrv XXVII, p. 318.

¹⁰²² Qrv XXVII, p. 320.

between the freed-men and the slaves),¹⁰²³ and that this contest that seems so unevenly matched still manages to raise the interest of the whole court. To make the contest seem even less fair, the vagrant has to match both the accomplishments and drinking of the two best warriors of the land. In terms of the spectators this might have been as exciting as a wrestling match between two berserks and a toddler. This may be a narratorial technique, as the reader is well aware of the fact that the vagrant is indeed one of the greatest legendary warriors, making the reader (and not the court and the actual audience to the contest) the one who is really interested in the outcome of the match. In the eyes of the reader the contest is not so ill-matched, as maybe two of the greatest warriors would actually prove to be as powerful and verbally skilled as Qrvar-Oddr. This justifies what is, just in appearance, an uneven match of accomplishments, drinking and verbal skills. We must also take into consideration the fact that this is a legendary saga, so that the laws of literary realism apply less than in other saga genres.

In any case, in this *mannjafnaðr* alcohol clearly plays an important and active role as part of the contest. For the first three rounds the game seems evenly-matched, with both sides drinking their horns and reciting their poetry. But then, after the fourth round, Sigurðr and Sjólftr stop boasting. This could be due either to the fact that they had already become too drunk to compose poetry or to the fact that by then they had run out of accomplishments to boast of. This last possibility seems to be correct, since the drinking continues for yet another four rounds, and only then does Qrvar-Oddr notice that “*þeir váru fyrir lagðir í skáldskapnum.*”¹⁰²⁴ (they were beyond composing poetry.¹⁰²⁵) The contest does not end, then, when one of the contestants runs out of accomplishments to boast of, but to further the humiliation of being lesser men than their opponent it continues until they are outdrunk. Sigurðr and Sjólftr cannot invent new

¹⁰²³ The importance of seating arrangements has been discussed in Chapter 4.

¹⁰²⁴ *Qrv* XXVII, p. 318.

¹⁰²⁵ It is interesting to notice that in this passage poetry-composing is not necessarily connected with drunkenness, as one could suppose from the story of Óðinn's drunkenness connected with the invention of poetry.

deeds to boast of, as any deeds they had already attained would already have been known to their audience; this principle can be extrapolated to other *mannjafnaðar* in literature. Finally, Qrvar-Oddr seems to make a point about how much better a man he is not only by having achieved more valorous deeds in his life than them both, but also by being able to drink much more than both of them without becoming drunk. He proves his manliness not only in his deeds, but also in his ability to drink as much as necessary and not losing self-control.

However, men less extraordinary than a legendary hero could end up drinking 'their wits out of themselves' while in a boasting mood; and on some occasions people did profit from their drunkenness. This occurs in another kind of prowess contest, one in which men boast of the deeds that they think themselves able to achieve instead of about the ones that they have already accomplished. The need to prove ability and power leads some heroes to make oaths that they cannot achieve regardless of the possibility of losing their honour or their life in the attempt to fulfil it. And, as is to be expected from our topic of research, oath vowing combined with drunkenness in the wrong context seems to have been the instrument for the downfall of many a great warrior.

Jómsvíkinga saga, one version of which is included in the fourteenth-century *Flateyjarbók*, narrates the rise and fall of the Jómsvíkings, a legendary warrior clan of the tenth century. For the purposes of this study we will focus on the source of their downfall. This begins while they attend an *erfi* at the court of King Sveinn. The Jómsvíkings start drinking the funeral toast, and

*drekka þeir Jómsvíkingar ákafliga hit fyrsta kveld, ok fœr á þá mjök, ok þat sama finnr Sveinn konungr, at þeir gerast nær allir ólóðir með þeim hætti, at þeir vǫru allir svá málgir ok kátir ok þykkir lítit fyrir at mæla þat, er þeir vildu gjarna ómælt hafa, ef þeir væri ódrukknir*¹⁰²⁶.

(the Jómsvíkings drank enthusiastically the first night, and they drank large amounts, and King Sveinn noticed it, that they became almost completely drunk and so running this risk; that they all were so talkative and merry and thought little before speaking that which they would have rather left unspoken if they were not drunk.)

¹⁰²⁶ *Jvs* CXLIV, p. 197.

King Sveinn, being the secret arch-nemesis of the Jómsvikings, cannot let this opportunity pass by, and profits from the drunkenness and loquaciousness of the men to plot their downfall by proposing a drinking game; “*nokkura nýja gleði til skemmtunar mönnum*”¹⁰²⁷ (some new merriness [game] for the entertainment of the men), which consists of making oaths. King Sveinn convinces them to engage in the game by telling them that

*‘veit ek menn gört hafa jafnan’, segir hann, ‘at góðum veizlum ok þar, er mannvæl er gott saman komit, at menn hafa strengt heit sér til skemmtanar ok ágætis, ok er þess fúss, at vér freistum þess gamans, því at ek þykkjumst þat sjá, svá miklu sem þér eruð nú ágætari, Jómsvikingar, um alla norðurhálfu heims an allir menn aðrir, þá er þat auðsýnt, at þat mun með meira móti vera, er þér vilið upp taka um heitstrengingar en aðrir menn’*¹⁰²⁸

(‘I know that men have done comparisons’ he says ‘at good feasts and there where upstanding men gather, that men have made oaths for their own entertainment and glory, and this is what I am eager for, that we try this for fun, because I think that you, as great as you are also more glorious, Jómsvikings, than all other men on all the northern parts of the world, it is obvious, that you must with more reason be the ones that will make vows instead of other men.’)

Once the trap is set - by the combination of drunkenness and alluding to men’s prowess and manliness in order to coerce them into promising great deeds - the Jómsvikings fall for it and make vows so great that they are beyond their means.¹⁰²⁹ This leads them to their deaths as can be attested in the following chapters of the saga. On their side the Jómsvikings are too drunk to be able to remember the vows they make. The next morning they must be reminded of the vows they made the previous night so that they can try to accomplish them and at least try to save their honour in the attempt.¹⁰³⁰

These drinking games in which men were supposed to display their prowess, by making vows in which they would put all their strength and wits to a trial, could be

¹⁰²⁷ *Jvs* CXLIV, p. 197.

¹⁰²⁸ *Jvs* CXLIV, p. 197-98.

¹⁰²⁹ *Jvs* CXLV, p. 198-99.

¹⁰³⁰ “*Nú talast þau Ástriðr við, ok spyr hon, hvárt hann minntist nokkut, hvers han hefði heit strengt um kveldit. En hann svarar ok lézt eigi muna, at hann hefði neins heit strengt.*” (*Jvs* CXLVI, p. 199) (Now he and Ástriðr talk and she asks whether he remembered something of the way in which he had made vows during the evening. And he answers and he remembers nothing, that he had made vows to no-one).

easily abused by more sober people who saw in the combination of drunkenness and boasting an effective tool to conquer an enemy who otherwise could not be defeated by weapons.¹⁰³¹

Making this kind of vow did not always have to end tragically, but on some occasions they ended with some men losing their honour, without the need of an enemy inciting them into making vows beyond their means. We can find an example of this in *Harðar saga* when, during a Yule feast, a group of men make a series of vows in the following fashion: “*er menn váru komnir í sæti jólakveld hit fyrsta, stóð Hróarr upp ok mælti: ‘Hér stíg ek á stokk, ok strengi ek þess heit, at ek skal hafa brotit haug Sóta víkings fyrir önnur jól.’*”¹⁰³² (when the men had arrived and sat down on the first Yule evening Hróarr stood up and said: ‘Here I step on the trunk and make this vow, that I shall have broken into Sóti the viking’s burial mound before next Yule.’”) This creates a chain reaction of men who want to prove themselves just as worthy as Hróarr and make similar vows, sometimes not without questioning the whole purpose of the game, as is the case of Hqrðr, who questions; ‘*Mun eigi sannligt at fylgja þínum siðum? Strengi ek þess heit at fara með þér í Sótahaug ok eigi fyrr í burtu en þú.*’¹⁰³³ (‘Is it proper to follow your tradition? I make this vow, to go with you to Sóti’s burial mound and not to be gone before you.’) All in all, the whole ideology of the game becomes clear through Helgi’s vow. “*Helgi strengdi ok þess heit at fylgja Herði ok Geir, hvert sem þeir færi, ef hann kæmist, ok meta engan meira, meðan þeir lifði báðir.*”¹⁰³⁴ (Helgi also made this vow, to follow Hqrðr and Geirr, wherever they went, if he was able to follow, and acknowledge no one as their superior as long as both of them lived.) As may be expected, only Hqrðr manages to keep his vow and, with it, his honour.

¹⁰³¹ Drunkenness as an instrument of power and deception will be discussed in Chapter 7.2.

¹⁰³² *Harð XIV*, p. 38.

¹⁰³³ *Harð XIV*, p. 39.

¹⁰³⁴ *Harð XIV*, p. 39.

What is relevant about this passage is that, at least in saga literature, it seems that whenever men of similar standing drink together there is no actual need for a troublemaker to incite them to prove that one is more worthy than the other. Drinking men will do of their own accord. Helgi's vow not to recognize anyone as superior to the group of men that are joining the mound-breaking expedition proves the ideology behind this vow-making drinking game. It is, in a certain way another form of *mannjafnaðr* in which the contestants compare with each other with regard, not to the feats that they have achieved, but to those they are willing to achieve.

In general *mannjafnaðar* and oath-making contests were games by which men tried to state their place in society by declaring how powerful they were. This was done either by boasting of the deeds they had accomplished or by promising to undertake deeds that would prove them worthier than other men. These games, as presented in the literary sources, seem to have taken place while drinking, though the act of drinking did not necessarily play an active role in the competition. Drunkenness, however, seems to have a passive role, as alcohol consumption while engaging in these competitions could lead a man to boast about deeds he had not achieved or about feats that he would not be able to achieve. Remaining sober while drinking seems to have been another attribute to be sought by men who wanted to be worthy of praise and admiration.

CHAPTER 7 – ALCOHOLIC DRINKS AS A TOOL OF POWER: DRUNKENNESS AND DECEPTION

7.1 - MAGIC DRINKS

Nú þótt mönnum þykki slíkir hlutir ótrúligir, þá verður þat þó hverr at segja, er hann hefir sét eða heyrt. Þar er ok vant móti at mæla, er inir fyrri fræðimenn hafa samsett. Hefði þeir þat vel mátt segja, at á annan veg hefði at borist, ef þeir vildi.¹⁰³⁵

Another way of gaining more power through alcohol was the use of magic drinks. These could be used either to enhance or deteriorate the personal qualities of the consumer or to render an enemy helpless. As we will see below, the magical properties of these drinks could have a physical or an intellectual effect on the consumer, and on some occasions they could have both effects. The intellectual consequences can be divided into mnemonic and emotional, which sometimes are simultaneous. In short, the mnemonic properties of magic drinks could make a person gain or lose their memory, while the emotional properties could make a person gain or lose affection for a certain individual or group of individuals. On the other hand the physical effects of the magic drinks can be of two different types; that is, they can have an influence on either people's vigour or their health. When it comes to the influence over the drinker's vigour, the potions seem to be of only one kind: the drinker gains strength and/or courage by the intake of magic alcoholic beverages. The effects on health can be twofold, that is, the consumption of these alcoholic beverages can either take away or restore their wellbeing to men and women and can even cure wounds. Perhaps not surprisingly most of the references to magic drinks come from the *Fornaldar sqgur*, as

¹⁰³⁵ Now, even if people think such things incredible, it is yet necessary that each person reports what he has seen or heard. And it is not easy to contradict what learned men have written in the past. If they wanted to, they could have told it [the story] differently if it had happened in another way. (*GHR XXXV*, p. 231).

their link with the fantastic make them an ideal motif to be included in this genre. Within this genre *Gǫngu-Hrólf's saga* and *Vǫlsunga saga* are the texts in which magic beverages are mentioned most often, so I will largely depend on them for my study. The rest of the examples to be analyzed are found in the *Poetic Edda*, and there is just one instance of a magic drink coming from the *Íslendinga sǫgur*, but in this case the saga in question –*Gull-Þóris saga*– deals more with the realm of the fantastic than with the pseudo-historical facts typical of the genre.

As we will see below, all the above mentioned properties of magic alcoholic beverages, excepting the ones involving health, are analogous not only to the effects of alcohol on people but also to many of the aspects of alcohol discussed earlier in this study. But before proceeding with the analysis of these magic drinks, let us begin by exploring the components of such beverages.

This section will be the most speculative of all this study. This is partly due to the fact that here we are dealing with magic drinks, whose role I am trying to explain. But the speculative nature of this section is mostly due to the same properties of the magic alcoholic drinks to be discussed, which are very similar to the effects of non-magic alcoholic drinks, just taken to an extreme situation in which a few drops of a certain concoction can transmit the effects of over-indulging in drinks. These properties are loss of memory, the ability to increase or decrease friendship and lastly the fact that people that ingest these drinks feel able to achieve that which they are not able to achieve even when sober. As I discuss the properties of each kind of magic potion I will explain the reasons why I believe that the idea of each of these drinks might be inspired by the actual effects of alcohol over the organism, but taken to an extreme. In general, I believe that the actual magic in these concoctions was the ability to create the effect of an intense drunkenness, but just with a few drops.

MAGICAL RECIPES

There are very few sources for the ingredients that were added to alcoholic drinks in order to concoct a magic drink. Most of these references are to be found in *Vqlsunga saga* as part of a gnomic poem recited by Brynhildr in order to instruct Sigurðr in the magic arts. This poem is almost identical to the eddic poem *Sigrdrifumál*, found in the *Codex Regius* of the *Poetic Edda*. Since the mid thirteenth century *Vqlsunga saga* is a prose adaptation of the eddic poems concerning the Vqlsung cycle, I will quote directly from the *Poetic Edda* and include in the footnotes the references to its equivalent in the saga.

Among the recipes to blend a magic drink we can find the following, instructing how to avoid being poisoned:

Full scal signa oc við fári síá
ok verpa lauki í lqg:
þá ec þat veit, at þér verðr aldri
*meinblandinn miqðr.*¹⁰³⁶

(You shall make a sign on the cup and look for mischief / and throw leek¹⁰³⁷ in the drink: / then I know this, / that to you the mead will never become poisonous.)

The instructions clearly involve, apart from the use of leek or garlic, a certain ritual to be performed over the cup that may contain a poisoned drink. The main active ingredient, though, is garlic or leek. Wilhem Heizmann renders the word *laukr* as “*lauch (allium)*”¹⁰³⁸ (leek (Latin *allium*)), but then renders the Latin *allium* as “*Knoblauch*”¹⁰³⁹ (garlic). AEW translates it as “*lauch*”¹⁰⁴⁰ (leek). This plant is not often

¹⁰³⁶ *Sd* 8; *Vqls* XX, p. 159.

¹⁰³⁷ *Laukr* can be translated both as leek and, in as garlic. This last seems to have been the main meaning in old poetry. See *IED*, *laukr*.

¹⁰³⁸ Wilhem Heizmann, *Wörterbuch der Pflanzennamen im Altwestnordischen* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter: 1993), p. 34.

¹⁰³⁹ Heizmann, 91. A more serious study than that of Heizmann was done by Pollington, who recorded a miscellany of Old-English medical texts. According to his study, both leek and garlic have similar medicinal properties as do all the other plants in the same family. “Leek leac the vegetable leek (*allium porum*), and any alliaceous or layered vegetable generally, such as an onion, garlic, etc. Garlic in particular is a powerful antibiotic, and inhibits the growth of bacteria. Hatfield recounts the traditional English proverb, recorded in the 17th century ‘Eat leeks in Lide and ramsins in May / And all the year after Physitians may play’” (Stephen Pollington, *Leechcraft: Early English Charms, Plant Lore, and Healing*, (London: Anglo-Saxon Books, 2000), p. 136. Also, “Garlic garlife (*allium sativum*). This strongly-flavoured root has its name direct from Old English, where *gar* signifies ‘spear’ (sharp-tasting, or with long and slender leaves?) and *leac* any kind of multilayered onion-like vegetable, our word ‘leek’.

mentioned in the sources; however it seems to have been a highly esteemed plant. According to the Eddic poem *Vqluspá* it was the first plant to grow when the Earth was created¹⁰⁴¹ and as a matter of fact it is the only plant mentioned in the creation myth. On the other hand *Vqlsunga saga* mentions that it is the best of herbs: “*Svá bar hann af öllum mönnum sem gull af járnri eða laukr af öðrum grösom*”¹⁰⁴² (So he excels all other men like gold is to iron or like garlic/leek is to any other herbs) but the source does not attest why. Perhaps a clue to the properties of this plant is to be found in *Ragnars saga Loðbrókar*, where we are told that “*þat er náttúra þess lauks, at maðr má lengi lifa, þótt hann hafi enga aðra fæðu*”¹⁰⁴³ (it is the nature of this leek/garlic, that a man may live for a long while even though he has no other food). This turns leek/garlic into an almost miraculous plant being able to confer and/or sustain life. However its magic uses are attested only in one other source, namely *Vqlsa þátr*, a short story of a legendary nature included in *Flateyjarbók*'s version of *Óláfs saga helga*. The life-preserving properties of the plant are exploited in this narrative, where the plant is used to preserve the life of an amputated horse phallus in the following fashion. The housewife confiscates the horse-phallus from a thrall that has been using it to bully people in the farm. Once the penis is in her possession she: “*vefr innan í einum línúki ok berr hjá lauka ok önnur grös, svá at þar fyrir mætti hann eigi rotna.*”¹⁰⁴⁴ (wrapped it in a linen kerchief and set it in leek/garlic and other herbs so that it would not rot.) The result of this practice is that

The plant has strong antiseptic qualities and there are many apocryphal stories of its use against infective diseases, coughs, asthma, bronchitis and so on. In folk tradition, garlic has been associated with the devil, but conversely could be worn to protect against the walking dead on All Hollows Eve.” (Pollington, *Leechcraft*, p. 124).

¹⁰⁴⁰ *AEW*, *laukr*.

¹⁰⁴¹ “*Áðr Burs synir biqðom um yppu, / þeir er miðgarð, mæran scópo; / sól scein sunnan á salar steina, / þá var grund groin grænom lauki.*” (First the sons of Burr lifted the earth above the waters/ they then shaped the mighty Miðgarðr; / the sun shone from the south on the hall of stones / then on the ground grew green *laukr*.) *Vsp* 4.

¹⁰⁴² *Vqls* XXXII, p. 194.

¹⁰⁴³ *Ragn* I, p. 221.

¹⁰⁴⁴ *Vqlsa* CCLXV, p. 442.

the penis could become erect at will in order to be used at the household's religious ritual.¹⁰⁴⁵

Perhaps this belief that leek/garlic could preserve life so that it could be considered as an antidote against poisoning comes from what seems to be an actual 'medical' use of the plant, as described in *Fóstiþræðra saga*. In it a healing-woman treats the wound of injured warriors, and for this purpose “*Hon hafði þar gqrt í steinkatli af lauk ok qnnur grqs ok vellt þat saman ok gaf at eta þeim inum sárum mqqnum ok reyndi svá, hvárt þeir hqfðu holsár, því at þá kenndi af laukinum ór sárinu.*”¹⁰⁴⁶ (She had prepared a stone-pot with leek/garlic and other herbs and boiled them together and gave them to eat to the wounded men and in this way found whether they had vital wounds, because then she smelled the leek/onion coming out of the wound.¹⁰⁴⁷) Perhaps this technique to find out if a wound was deadly or not became, at some point, mistaken and in the folklore leek/garlic became understood as a life preserving plant and as an effective antidote against poisoning.

What we can know is that, as mentioned earlier on, leek was normally used for brewing before and even long after the introduction of hops to Scandinavia. As Erik Kjersgaard mentions

Man har vistnok altid tilsat fremmede stoffer, dels for at give smag, dels for at forøge øllets holdbarhed. Foruden de nævnte urteafkog kunne man bruge egebark, hvis indhold af garvesyre virker konserverende; men i tidlig middelalder foretrak man i hvert fald pors (myrica gale).¹⁰⁴⁸

(People have probably always added other ingredients partly to enhance the flavour; partly to augment the beer's lifetime. Besides the previously mentioned herbs people could use oak bark, as the acid it produces during fermentation works as a preservative; but in the Early Middle Ages people added leek [myrica gale] to each barrel.)

Almqvist coincides with this point of view and explains that:

¹⁰⁴⁵ This mixture of leek/garlic and other herbs is, perhaps, analogous to the *lifsgros* used in *EgÁsm* to restore life to an amputated hand so that it can be re-implanted on the stump. See *EgÁsm* XIV, p. 355.

¹⁰⁴⁶ *Fbr* XXIV, p. 275.

¹⁰⁴⁷ That is, if the wound had damaged a man's bowels or stomach, then the smell of the plant would come out through the orifice; in that case the wound would be considered as deadly.

¹⁰⁴⁸ Erik Kjersgaard, *Mad og Øl i Danmarks Middelalder* (Copenhagen: Nationalmuseet, 1978), p. 85.

It may be mentioned, however, that herbs other than hops were certainly used not infrequently by the Scandinavians in their beer-making. In Old-Norse sources we sometimes hear about intoxicating drinks to which herbs were added [...] and we know about the Cineraria beer (*porsöl* [leek-beer] in Swedish).¹⁰⁴⁹

Carving certain runes on the drinking vessel was also a way of transferring magical properties to a drink. However, this would actually turn the vessel into the conveyor of the spell, while the drink probably would remain a conventional drink. But it seems that the runes could also be carved onto the drink, as it says in *Sigrdrífumál*:

*á gleri oc a gulli, oc á gumma heillom,
í víni oc virtri, [...]
Allar vóro af scafnar, þær er vóro á ristnar,
oc hverfðar við inn helga mið.*¹⁰⁵⁰

(in glass and in gold, and in men's charms, / in wine and in new ale. [...] / All were scraped off, those which were carved on there, / and were mixed in the holy mead.)

The poem does not specify what was the purpose or properties of this mead blended with the scraps of all the runes carved on many different objects; however these scratches seem to have added to whatever was the magic purpose of this drink.

The rest of the magic ingredients that appear in the literary corpus are of a more abstract nature. So at the beginning of *Sigrdrífumál*'s gnomic lore Sigurðr is offered some *bjórr*, but it is not a regular drink as Sigrdrífa tells him:

*Biór færi ec þér, brynþings apaldr,
magni blandinn oc megintíri;
fullr er hann lióða oc licnstafa,
góðra galdra oc gamanrúna.*¹⁰⁵¹

(Bjórr I bring you, apple-tree of the battlefield, / blended¹⁰⁵² with strength and with much glory; / it is full of charms and healing staves, / good magic and merry talk.)

The main ingredients in this *bjórr* full of charms are two abstract concepts: *magn* (strength) and *tírr* (glory). The first of these is mentioned in a handful of occasions in connection with magic drinks. In *Vqlsunga saga* we read about a magic drink that

¹⁰⁴⁹ Bo Almqvist, 'The Viking Ale and the Rhine Gold: Some Notes on an Irish-Scottish Folk Legend and a Germanic Hero-Tale Motif', in *Viking Ale: Studies in Folklore Contacts Between the Northern and the Western Worlds*, ed. by Eilis Dhuibne and others. (Aberystwyth: Boethius Press, 1991), pp 65-81, 177-89 79.

¹⁰⁵⁰ *Sd* 17-18; *Vqls* XX, p. 161.

¹⁰⁵¹ *Sd* 5; *Vqls* XX, p. 158.

¹⁰⁵² As we could see in Chapter 2, to blend the mead can also refer to the act of brewing it.

causes memory loss. We are told that “*sá drykkur var blandinn með jarðar magni ok sæ ok dreyra sonar hennar, ok í því horni váru ristnir hvers kyns stafir ok roðnir með blóði*”¹⁰⁵³ (that drink was mixed with the strength of the earth and the sea and the blood of her son, and on the horn were carved all kinds of runes and reddened with blood.) The saga bases its rendering of the events on the eddic poem *Guðrúnarkviða II* in which it is said that:

*Færði mér Grimildr full at drecca,
svalt oc sárlict, né ec sacar munðac;
þat var um aukit urðar magni,
svalkǫldom sæ oc sonardreyra.*¹⁰⁵⁴

[Grimildr brought me a cup to drink from / fresh and sour, I could not remember; / it was increased with the strength of the earth / the cold of the sea and the blood of sons]

However the poem expands the list of the contents of the drink and, apart from a plethora of runes carved on the horn, it lists some of the ingredients:

*Vóru þeim bióri bǫl mǫrg saman,
urt allz viðar oc acarn brunnininn,
umdǫgg arins, iðrar blótnar,
svíns lifr soðin, þviat hon sacar deyfði*¹⁰⁵⁵.

[There were in the *bjórr* many evils together / herbs of all trees and the acorn / hearth dew, bowels of sacrifices, / boiled pig’s liver, so that her claims were forsaken]

The list of ingredients does not really help to clarify what the ‘strength of the earth’ consists of. It may be making reference to the several magic plants that were used in its concoction, seeing, perhaps, the psychotropic effects of the plants as being drawn out of the earth in which they grew. This seems a logic explanation, most of all taking into consideration that the ‘strength of the earth’ is sometimes said to be helpful just as in the examples of *Vǫlsunga saga* and *Guðrúnarkviða II* it is said to be noxious.

¹⁰⁵³ *Vǫls* XXXII, p. 196.

¹⁰⁵⁴ *GðrII* 21.

¹⁰⁵⁵ *GðrII* 23.

One instance of the beneficial properties of the ‘strength of the earth’ comes from the eddic poem *Hyndluljóð*, where it is said that an (unnamed) main deity born of nine mothers put it to a good use:

<i>Varð einn borinn</i>	<i>qllom meiri,</i>
<i>sá var aukinn</i>	<i>iarðar megni;</i>
<i>þann qveða stilli</i>	<i>stórauðgastan,</i>
<i>sif sifiaðan</i>	<i>siotom gørvqllom.¹⁰⁵⁶</i>

(One was born greater than all / he was increased with the strength of the earth / they calmly say that he is the wealthiest, / by marriage related in all abodes.)

This same deity, who could be identified with Heimdallr due to the fact that he was born of nine mothers,¹⁰⁵⁷ is also said to have been “*svá var aukinn iarðar megni, / svalkqldum sæ ok sonardreyra*”¹⁰⁵⁸ (increased with the strength of the earth, the cold of the sea and the blood of sons), which is exactly the same formula used for the magic drink in *Guðrúnarkviða II*. Even if in this instance the ‘strength of the earth’ is not used in connection with a beverage it makes reference to a positive quality maybe obtained by the same means of using ‘power-plants’.

The last instance in which *iarðar magn* is used in the literary corpus also makes reference to a positive quality of this magic ingredient. This comes from yet another eddic poem, in this instance *Hávamál* 137. In it is said that “*hvars þú ql dreccir, kíós þú þér iarðar megin! / Þvíat iqrð tegr við qlðri.*”¹⁰⁵⁹ (when you drink *ql*, choose for yourself the strength of the earth,/ because the earth takes everything with it.) Svava Jakobsdóttir interprets this stanza of *Hávamál* in connection with stanzas 141, in which the narrator affirms to have grown powerful and wise, and stanzas 107 and 108 of the same poem, in which the theft of the mead by Óðinn is narrated. She argues that in stanza 141 “Óðinn might be confirming his right to the realm, as kings had to do; he has been through both parts of the ceremony properly, and has grown in wisdom and been

¹⁰⁵⁶ *Hdl* 43.

¹⁰⁵⁷ See *Gylf* 27, p. 25.

¹⁰⁵⁸ *Hdl* 38.

¹⁰⁵⁹ *Háv* 137.

‘*aukinn iarðar megni*’ (empowered with the strength of the earth). In other words, he has slept with the goddess.”¹⁰⁶⁰ This explanation seems to be a bit far fetched. First of all, Svava is mixing several poems that were composed separately and later assembled as a unity called *Hávamál*. The poem called *Loddfáfnismál* [stanzas 111-137] does not contain any chronological clues that allow us to place it as taking place before or after the poem narrating the theft of the mead [stanzas 104-110]. On the other hand, the references to *jarðar magn* in the poem make only reference to its use when drinking *ql* - which due to metric and alliterative requirements could be interpreted as *mjqðr*, *vin* or any other alcoholic drink - saying that it shall be chosen when ingesting alcohol, and probably when inebriated, as the earth takes it all. However, there are no references in the poem to the empowerment of Óðinn due to its ingestion; the use of *jarðar magn* appears just as a piece of advice among a long list of gnomic lore. Empowerment or a certain strengthening is mentioned in *Guðrúnarkviða II*, *Hyndluljóð* and *Vǫlsunga saga*, but never in *Hávamál*. David Evans’ interpretation of the stanza seems to be more plausible. He explicates that;

There might be a specific connection with the so-called *terra-sigilata*, cakes of earth rich in iron oxide, stamped with the image of Diana or Christ, exported from Lemnos and recommended as a remedy against poison. This is referred in the Old Icelandic Medical Miscellany [...] There may also be a connection with the more general belief in the earth’s holy and curative properties.¹⁰⁶¹

Thus the ‘strength of the earth’ could be interpreted as using the curative properties of the earth, but that still would not explain the occasions on which it is said to be noxious. That is unless we consider as well the harmful properties of the earth, which could also be explained as the use of different magic plants, all of which dragged their strength from the soil and which could be used both to harm and/or to alleviate.

As we can see, the texts do not provide a large number of ingredients that could be added in order to prepare a magic concoction. Leek/garlic is the plant which is

¹⁰⁶⁰ Svava Jakobsdóttir, p. 39.

¹⁰⁶¹ Evans, ‘Commentary’, p. 131.

mentioned more often, and its perception as a magical ingredient could be due to its medical uses. When it comes to ingredients of a more abstract nature, *jarðar magn* is the most commonly mentioned, but its obscure nature does not let us grasp the full meaning of the concept.

INTELLECTUAL EFFECTS OF MAGIC DRINKS

As mentioned earlier on, magic drinks could affect the intellectual abilities of those who consumed them. This could be both in a mnemonic and in an emotional way. I will begin with an analysis of the ways in which the consumption of magic alcohol helps or impairs people's memory and then continue with an analysis of its impact on human emotions.

The effect of magic alcohol over people's memory is the type of influence most frequently referred to in the literary corpus. On most occasions these drinks are intended to erase the recollection of past events and only in a few instances they are supposed to improve the knowledge of past events. When it comes to memory loss the general formula tends to follow a similar pattern to that of Sigurðr in *Vǫlsunga saga*: "*Eitt kveld, er þeir sátu við drykk, ris drottning upp ok gekk fyrir Sigurð ok kvaddi hann ok mælti: [...] 'Tak hér við horni ok drekk.' Hann tók við ok drakk af.' [...] ok við þann drykk mundi hann ekki til Brynhildar.*"¹⁰⁶² (one evening, when they sat with drinks, the queen rose up and went to Sigurðr and greeted him and said: [...] 'Take this horn and drink' He took it and drank [...] and because of this drink he could not remember Brynhildr.) In general terms, the person is always tricked into drinking the magic drink and the loss of memory is always related to the person's beloved one, as is the case with Sigurðr. Likewise, after Sigurðr is tricked into forgetting Brynhildr, his fiancée, so that he can marry Guðrún, later on Guðrún is tricked in a similar fashion into forgetting the

¹⁰⁶² *Vǫls* XXVI, p. 173.

death of Sigurðr and her sons: “*Síðan færði Grímhildr henni meinsamligan drykk, ok varð hún við at taka ok mundi síðan engar sakar.*”¹⁰⁶³ (Then Grímhildr brought her a harmful drink, and she was coerced into taking it and afterwards she did not remember the charges.) Since this drink is brought to her by the same Grímhildr who takes the drink to Sigurðr we can infer that both drinks were concocted using the same methods as both have the same results: obliviousness of the beloved ones.

Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar describes a beverage that has similar effects, though, as we will see further on, it has also the property of making a person sick. In this saga we are told about Kollr, King of Indíaland, who had a horn with the following properties: “*Þat var náttúra drykkjar þess, er í var neðra gólfí, at hverr, sem af drakk, fékk vanheilsu þá, er lepra heitir, ok óminni svá mikit, at hann mundi engan þann hlut, sem áðr hafði verit, en ef drukkit var af efra hlut hornsins, þá bættist þegar.*”¹⁰⁶⁴ (Such was the nature of this drink, that was in the lower part, that each, who drank from it, got that illness that is called leprosy, and the loss of memory was so great that he could not recall that which he had been, and if it was drunk from the upper part of the horn, then both -health and memory- were restored.) The results are that when Víkingr drinks from it “*mundi hann engan hlut, sem áðr hafði verit, en sízt til Hunvarar*”¹⁰⁶⁵ (he did not remember anything, that which he had been, and he remembered Hunvör least of all.) A last instance of such a drink is that in *Göngu-Hrólfss saga*, when a dwarf tries to seduce Ingibjörg, Björn’s wife. As part of his wooing he offers her a jug to drink from, but she refuses it and spills the drink on the floor. However, we are told that later on “*Ingibjörg, kona Bjarnar, tók krankleika nokkurn undarlígan um vetrinn. Hún gerðist öll blá sem hel, en sinnaði um engan hlut, sem hún væri vitstola.*”¹⁰⁶⁶ (Ingibjörg, Björn’s wife, caught an extraordinary disease during the winter. She became all black as Hel, and

¹⁰⁶³ *Vqls* XXXII, p. 196.

¹⁰⁶⁴ *ÞorstVik* III, p. 7.

¹⁰⁶⁵ *ÞorstVik* V, p. 11.

¹⁰⁶⁶ *GHR* XXIII, p. 222.

cared for nothing, as if she had been wit-stolen.) It seems that the dwarf eventually succeeds in tricking her to drink a magic beverage like the one he first offered her, most of all because later on we are told that “*Hann tók Ingibjörgu ok lagði í sæng hjá sér hverja nótt, Birni ásjáanda, ok hafði hún allt blíðlæti við hann, en mundi ekki til Bjarnar, bónda síns.*”¹⁰⁶⁷ (He took Ingibjörg and laid next to her in bed every night in front of Björn, and she was very friendly towards him [the dwarf] and remembered nothing of Björn, her husband.) Oblivion of the beloved one, as we have seen, is one of the symptoms of having drunk a magic potion intended to alter people’s memories.

In short we can see that in all the instances of ingestion of a magic drink that affects the memory, the result is the inability to recollect past events, but most of all, all the sources emphasize the fact that the beloved one is forgotten. The effects of these magic drinks resemble in a certain way the effects of overindulging in alcohol, with the consequence of a blackout, with the sole difference that the amnesia caused by these drinks lasts for more than one night. Perhaps the altered state of consciousness caused by them was due to the addition of some psychotropic plants to the beverage. However we lack the evidence to support such a point of view. What we can know is that these strong drinks were not spirits, for, as we have seen, spirits were not introduced to Scandinavia until the late fifteenth century. In any case, the reaction that they provoke is extremely similar to that discussed later in this chapter, of ‘*drykkja vit út frá sér*’ (drink the wit out of the self)¹⁰⁶⁸ and in the case of *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* the effects are described in a very similar way; Ingibjörg becomes *vitstola* (wit-stolen). Whatever was mixed with the drinks was a substance strong enough as to cause an altered state of consciousness that could last for a long period, and perhaps once the individual was under the influence of the beverage it could be easier to trick him or her into consuming more, thus prolonging the period of oblivion. Finally, due to the fact that the sources

¹⁰⁶⁷ *GHR* XXIII, p. 224.

¹⁰⁶⁸ See section 7.2.

always connect such beverages with the oblivion of the beloved one in order to take on a new lover, one should not discard the possibility of them being some sort of love-philtre prepared by lovers in competition for the attention and emotional control of a certain person. This last point may become clearer once we study the drinks that are capable of restoring memory.

As mentioned earlier on, there are a few cases of beverages that allow people to regain or improve their memory. The only example of a drink that makes a person improve his memory comes from the Eddic poem *Hyndluljóð*, while all the other instances refer to antidotes against beverages that induce oblivion. The reference to the magic drink in the poem is brief, even if it is the driving force behind the whole story. In it, Freyja takes Óttarr, her lover, in the shape of a boar to consult a *vq/va* so that she can give him a drink of a magic *ql* that will allow him to remember his whole genealogy. Stanza 45 reads as follows:

*Ber þú minnisql minom geli,
svát hann qll muni orð at tína
þessar ræðo á þriðia morni,
þá er þeir Angantýr ætteir reikia.¹⁰⁶⁹*

[Give memory-*ql* to my boar / so that he all remembers, words to recount / from this conversation, on the third morning, / then when those from Angantýr's kin he recounts.]

The abilities of speech and memory conferred by this magic drink are somehow comparable to the alleged properties of the mead stolen by Óðinn.¹⁰⁷⁰ While the mead made out of Kvasir's blood has the characteristic that "*hverr er af drekkur verðr skáld eða fræðamaðr*"¹⁰⁷¹ (each who drinks from it becomes a poet or a scholar) the *minnisql* drunk by Óttarr turns him into a person learned in history, which is very similar to being a scholar. Also, this drink is, just as the 'mead of poetry' was, in the possession of a *Jqgunn*-woman from whom it is taken by force.

¹⁰⁶⁹ *Hyndluljóð* 45.

¹⁰⁷⁰ See Chapter 3.

¹⁰⁷¹ *Skspn* 57, p. 3

The rest of the beverages that confer memory work mainly as antidotes against the drinks which take the memory away, and in the case of Sigurðr it seems that the beverage just loses its effects. *Vǫlsunga saga* tells that after his marriage with Guðrún “ok er lokit er þessi veizlu, minnir Sigurðr allra eiða við Brynhildi”¹⁰⁷² (and when this feast ended, Sigurðr remembers all his vows to Brynhildr.). So, without the need of an antidote, the magic potion seems to have lost its effects. If it was indeed a drug that had been provided to him in order to make him forget Brynhildr, then after the marriage the need to keep him under the influence of the drink becomes unnecessary, and they stop coercing him into taking it.

In the case of *Gǫngu-Hrólfss saga* the memory of Ingibjörg is restored by the same dwarf who took it away, as he “gaf henni minnisveig at drekka, ok vitkaðist hún þá skjótt.”¹⁰⁷³ (gave her a memory-beverage to drink, and she quickly regained her wit). Similarly, in the case of Víkingr, in *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar* the antidote comes not from the same person but from the same vessel and drink which made him lose his memory. To cure him “Hálfðan dreypir þá á varrir honum af inum efra hlut hornsins. Raknar Víkingr þá við, ok er hann tók at magnast, var því líkt sem hann vaknaði af svefni.”¹⁰⁷⁴ (Hálfðan put drops of the liquid from the upper part of the horn on his lips. Hálfðan recovered his senses with that, and he became stronger, it was as if he had woken from a dream.) It is interesting to notice that in these instances the recovery of memory is equated with a gaining of wits, which are often said to be lost due to excessive drinking.¹⁰⁷⁵ Perhaps the idea of magic potions taking away and restoring memory came from analyzing the effect of regular alcoholic drinks over people’s minds, which then led to imagining a concentrated drink that could produce the effect of overindulgence with only a few drops.

¹⁰⁷² *Vǫls* XXVIII, p. 178.

¹⁰⁷³ *GHr* XXV, p. 230.

¹⁰⁷⁴ *ÞorstVik* VI, p. 14.

¹⁰⁷⁵ See section 7.2.

Apart from the previously mentioned effects of the magic drinks, which made people forget about their beloved in order to take on a new lover, there were other ways in which they could affect people's emotions. There was a certain kind of drink that could enforce or destroy friendship, and could be used as a tool to create or destroy alliances. There are, however, only two instances in which these beverages are mentioned, both of them found in *Gqngu-Hrólfs saga*.

The first example takes place when Gqngu-Hrólfr and Stefnir are having a quarrel over a woman. One night Gqngu-Hrólfr meets the ghost of one of his ancestors, who gives him two buckets full of drink. The ghost tells him "*Hér eru tvær byttur, er þú skalt við taka ok skenkja öllum þínum mönnum af annarri, þegar þeir vakna í morgin, en af inni minni byttunni skulið þit Stefnir drekka, ok mun ykk þaðan af engi hlutr at áskilnaði verða.*"¹⁰⁷⁶ (Here are two buckets, which you shall take with you, and serve drinks to all your men from one as soon as they wake up in the morning, and you and Stefnir shall drink from the other bucket, and after that you will never have disagreements on any subject.) The effects of the first bucket's drink will be discussed later on in this section. As for the second bucket we read that the effects were that "*Settust þeir þá niðr ok drukku af byttunni, ok þóttust þeir við þann drykk mikit styrkna. Gerðist Stefnir þá blíðr við Hrólfr ok segir honum makligast at njóta Ingigerðar.*"¹⁰⁷⁷ (They sat down and drunk from the bucket and they felt much stronger with that drink. Then Stefnir became friendly towards Hrólfr and says him to be best suited to have Ingigerðr.) The effect of this beverage is somehow similar to those of magic drinks making a person forget the beloved one. The main difference is that here, even though both Gqngu-Hrólfr and Stefnir drink the same potion, the only one that forsakes his beloved one is Stefnir. This might be because this potion was intended to improve friendships rather than to induce temporary amnesia. Magic drinks that have such an

¹⁰⁷⁶ *GHR XXXII*, p. 254.

¹⁰⁷⁷ *GHR XXXII*, p. 255.

effect can be also an extrapolation of the characteristics of alcohol intake, as its consumption works as an emotional booster. It is well known that one of the effects of alcohol is that it reduces the serotonin level in the organism. Another instance in which serotonin production decreases (and the production of many other hormones is boosted up) is when a person falls in love. Hence, alcohol intake might cause a sensation similar to love or to an amplified sense of friendship between fellow drinkers. Friendliness as a result of alcohol intake might have led to the conception of a magic brew with the characteristics and results of that which Gǫngu-Hrolfr and Stefnir consume. Similarly, though the text does not mention it as being a magic brew, in *Vǫlsunga saga* we read that Sigurðr first noticed the extraordinary qualities of Guðrún while he is drinking: “*ok eitt kveld skenkir Guðrún. Sigurðr sér, at hún er væn kona ok at öllu in kurteisasta.*”¹⁰⁷⁸ (and one evening Guðrún serves the drinks. Sigurðr notices that she is a beautiful woman and most courtly in all manners.) In the narrative, this occurs soon after Sigurðr drinks the potion that makes him forget Brynhildr, however the saga does not mention if the drink served by Guðrún was a love-potion or just a regular drink; in other words, we cannot know if Sigurðr gets infatuated by Guðrún because he ingested a love potion, because she was indeed beautiful or just because he was drunk.

Gǫngu-Hrólfs saga suggests the use of another magic brew that can induce the opposite effect to that we just mentioned. The same dwarf that seduces Björn's wife tries to set the whole court against Björn, and the dwarf seems to resort to a magic drink in order to achieve his goal. The saga says that one day, when the dwarf was at the court “*Fór jarl nú heim í staðinn með mönnum sínum, ok gengu undir drykkjuborð. En þegar hirðin hafði kennt fyrsta rétt ok drukkit fyrsta bikar, var öllum horfin vinátta við Björn.*”¹⁰⁷⁹ (Now the earl went home in the town with his men and went to the drinking-table. And as soon as the retinue had tasted the first course and drunk the first beaker

¹⁰⁷⁸ *Vǫls* XXVI, p. 174.

¹⁰⁷⁹ *GHr* XXIII, p. 223.

they all withdrew their friendship from Björn.) The only explanation for this change of attitude seems to be the ingestion of a magical beverage or, less likely, the consumption of a magical meal.

As we have seen before, communal drinking could also result in brawls, as is the case of *mannjafnaðar*. Perhaps this last kind of magic drink was making use of yet another property of alcohol, which is that of creating conflict among drunkards. In any case, its properties about forgetting friendship resemble those beverages that make someone forget about the beloved one.

PHYSICAL EFFECTS OF MAGIC DRINKS

Magic alcoholic beverages could also have an effect on the drinker's body, affecting their vigour and health. There are just a few examples of this kind of drink, and most of them overlap with some of the examples examined earlier about the intellectual effects of such potions. In general, this kind of alcoholic beverage could have two different effects. One is that it could make a person stronger and heal his wounds, while the second is that it could transmit a disease or cure the same disease it transmitted.

Our first example of a drink that could strengthen a person comes, once more, from *Gqngu-Hrólf's saga*, a very rich text when it comes to the use of magic concoctions. In it a character named Grímr tells a man that "*ek skal gefa þér enn meira afl en þú hefir áðr*"¹⁰⁸⁰ (I shall give you yet more physical strength than you had before.) When the man accepts the offer, then "*tók hann horn undan skikkju sinni ok gaf mér einn drykk. Þótti mér þá hlaupa afl í mik.*"¹⁰⁸¹ (he took a horn from under his cloak and gave me one drink. It seemed to me that physical strength then jumped into me.)

¹⁰⁸⁰ *GHr XXVII*, p. 234.

¹⁰⁸¹ *GHr XXVII*, p. 234.

The power conferred by this drink makes him so strong that he is able to defeat Gǫngu-Hrólfr, who is one of the strongest legendary heroes.

The same saga tells about a similar strength-conferring drink, already mentioned above. This comes from the previously mentioned bucket offered to Gǫngu-Hrólfr by the ghost of Hreggviðr. As we have already seen, the second bucket brought peace to the conflicted relationship between Gǫngu-Hrólfr and Stefnir. On the other hand the first bucket, which was to be drunk by his men, had a very different effect:

Árla um morgin vakti Hrólfr lið sitt ok skenkti öllum af byttunni, en þegar hverr hafði af drukkit, kenndi engi sinna sára, þótt áðr væri ófærir, þegar setst hafði með þeim. Eggjuðu þeir mest, at berjast skyldi, er áðr vildu harðast flýja.¹⁰⁸²

(Early in the morning Hrólfr roused his host and served everyone a drink from the bucket, and once they had drunk from it no one could feel his wounds, even though before they had been impaired, as soon as the drink had settled in them, those who before were more eager to flee now were the ones that were most incited to fight.)

This drink does not only have the ability to confer strength and cure wounds, but it can also transmit courage and strength to men. Perhaps this is another example of the resemblance between magic and common alcoholic beverages: if they are drunk in the right amount, both can make men believe that they are able to do the undoable.

The only example of a magic drink in the *Íslendinga sögur* refers precisely to this kind of strength-conferring drink. This is to be found in *Gull-Þóris saga*. In this saga Gull-Þórir dreams that has a conversation with a ghost, who provides him with a drink. The ghost does not mention what its properties are, but it is implied that it will confer on Gull-Þórir the strength to break into a cave and have a fight with the dragons that dwell in it. When the ghost offers Gull-Þórir the drink he says: “*Nú er hér kalkr, er þú skalt drekka af tvá drykki, en förunautr þinn einn drykk, en þá verður þat sem má.*”¹⁰⁸³ (Now here is a goblet, and you shall drink from it two times, and each one in your host shall drink once from it, and that which remains shall be left.) When Gull-

¹⁰⁸² *GH* XXXIII, p. 255.

¹⁰⁸³ *GullÞ* III, p. 185.

Þórir wakes up he finds the goblet next to him and drinks from it. We are not told if he felt empowered after having drunk it. But, as a matter of fact the drink was so strong that he and all his retinue fall asleep once more after having drunk from it. However Gull-Þórir and his companions have enough strength to go into the cave and defeat its dwellers.

This kind of beverage helped men do the unthinkable, that which was beyond their abilities – to find strength where there was none, and courage when surrender was the logical option. However, that is yet another property of alcohol, and in saga literature we can find several examples of men drinking just before a battle, maybe in order to gain the same courage that these magic drinks conferred.¹⁰⁸⁴

Finally, there are only two examples of drinks that can transmit and cure an illness. Both of them have been partially discussed before in this section, so I will only discuss them briefly. As mentioned before, *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar* makes reference to a horn, owned by the king of Indíaland, whose contents can transmit and cure leprosy, depending on the side of the horn from which the drink comes. When Víkingr drinks from this horn he becomes sleepy and “*honum var heldr orðit kynligt við drykkinn. Hann hafði hroll mikinn í bunkum [...] Tók hann þá krankleika mikinn ok lagðist í rekkju af sótt þeiri, er líkþrá heitir.*”¹⁰⁸⁵ (He had become strange because of the drink. He had great shivers in his body [...] He got a great illness and lay in bed due to that disease that is called leprosy.) He becomes infected with leprosy, and the only way to cure it is by having a drink from the upper rim of the horn.¹⁰⁸⁶ As a result his whole body becomes covered with a black scab and becomes weaker every day. When he finally manages to get a drink from the upper rim of the horn we are told that “*svá fell óhreinendi burt af honum sem hreistr af fiski, þar til er honum batnar dag frá degi, til*

¹⁰⁸⁴ Examples of men drinking before or during battle have been discussed in Chapter 4.

¹⁰⁸⁵ *ÞorstVik* V, p. 11.

¹⁰⁸⁶ Those who have drunk from a horn will realize that it is quite difficult to drink from the upper rim of the horn –that is, by holding the concave end downwards instead of upwards -, at least not without spilling all its contents; so this might have been considered as a rather difficult task.

þess er hann var heill."¹⁰⁸⁷ (so the uncleanness fell away from him like scales from a fish, with the result that he became better day by day and so it went until he was healed.) Ingibjörg, Björn's wife, contracts a very similar disease after probably being coerced by the dwarf into drinking the magic potion. As we have seen, *Gqngu-Hrólfs saga* reports that after being tricked by the dwarf "*Ingibjörg, kona Bjarnar, tók krankleika nokkurn undarlígan um vetrinn. Hún gerðist öll blá sem hel.*"¹⁰⁸⁸ (Ingibjörg, Björn's wife, caught an extraordinary disease during the winter. She became all black as Hel.) In both sagas the illness has the same symptoms, which consists in the skin of the diseased becoming black. Since the symptoms are the same, and *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar* names it as leprosy we could assume that Ingibjörg had become a leper. However that is not part of our matter of research. Perhaps it was just a motif that people who contracted a disease by the ingestion of a magic drink turned black. In any case, the evidence is too scant to determine the particular conditions that could be transmitted through drinks. Ingibjörg not only becomes black as a result of drinking a magic potion, but, just like Víkingr, she also loses her memory. The main difference is that Víkingr's health and memory are restored through a drink, while Ingibjörg's memory is recovered by drinking and her health is restored with an ointment. So the saga says that the dwarf "*færði Ingibjörgu ór klæðum ok smurði hörund hennar með góðum smyrslum*"¹⁰⁸⁹ (undressed Ingibjörg and rubbed her skin with a nice ointment), which is what ultimately restores her health.

The evidence is too scant to draw conclusions from the curative and noxious effects of alcohol over people's health. The idea of curing someone by using a magic drink could well come from the fact that medieval medical books recommend mixing

¹⁰⁸⁷ *ÞorstVik* VI, p. 14.

¹⁰⁸⁸ *GHR* XXXIII, p. 222.

¹⁰⁸⁹ *GHR* XXV, p. 230.

curative herbs with wine.¹⁰⁹⁰ The noxious effects of drinks may be due, apart from the obvious ill-condition that a hangover might cause, to the probable use of poisons mixed with beverages.

In general, we have seen that the magical properties of alcoholic drinks can affect people's memory, emotions, strength and health. The first three seem to be an extrapolation of the effects that non-magic alcohol can have over men's and women's psyche and physic. Maybe the idea of a magic drink that could create such effects was just an extrapolation, an exaggeration of the results of over-indulging in drinking, but achieved with only a few drops of a magic beverage. The strong and intense properties of these drinks have some resemblance with the effects of spirits, which were unknown in Scandinavia at the time. As we have seen, the magic effects of these drinks come from the ingredients - such as herbs, pig's flesh, strength and glory - used in their concoction, but the role of these ingredients is too obscure to draw any conclusions about their role in the beverage's effects.

7.2 - DRUNKENNESS AS AN INSTRUMENT OF POWER AND DECEPTION

*Sjaldan vegr sofandi maðr sigr*¹⁰⁹¹

In the prologue to his *Gesta Danorum*, written between 1208 and 1218¹⁰⁹², Saxo Grammaticus describes the Icelandic folk in the following manner:

*Nec Tylensium industria silentio oblitteranda: qui cum ob nativam soli
sterilitatem luxuriæ nutrimentis carentes officia continuæ sobrietatis*

¹⁰⁹⁰ For examples of medical prescriptions recommending the mixture of herbs with wine see *Codex Vindobonensis*.

¹⁰⁹¹ A sleeping man seldom gains the victory. *Vápnf* XVII, p. 58.

¹⁰⁹² Hilda Ellis Davidson, 'Edition and Commentary', in *The History of the Danes Books I-IX*, ed. by Hilda Ellis Davidson (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2002), pp. 1-15, 167-77 (p. 1).

*excerceant omiaque vitæ momenta ad excolendam alienorum operum
notitiam conferre soleant, inopiam ingenio pensant.*¹⁰⁹³

(The diligence of the men of Iceland must not be shrouded in silence; since the barrenness of their native soil offers no means of self-indulgence, they pursue a steady routine of temperance and devote all their time to improving our knowledge of other's deeds, compensating for poverty by their intelligence.)¹⁰⁹⁴

The sobriety (*sobrietas*) Saxo mentions with regard to Icelandic culture appears to be not only due to the scarcity and cost of resources and alcohol in the island but it is also presented as a cultural trait. Abstinence or moderation in the consumption of alcohol could also have derived from the awareness of the effects of alcohol over people's minds. These ideas, along with a principle of moderation, are stressed in the didactic poem *Hávamál*, where several stanzas warn the audience against drunkenness and the effects of alcohol.¹⁰⁹⁵ Stanzas 11-14 instruct the audience about how to behave while travelling, an occasion on which it was most likely to find oneself among strangers. Stanza 11 advises the traveller to remain sober at all times and avoid overindulging in alcohol.

*Byrði betri berrat maðr brauto at
en sé manvit mikit;
vegnest verra vegra hann velli at,
en sé ofdryccia qls.*¹⁰⁹⁶

(No better burden could a man carry on the road /
than a great commonsense; / worse travelling
provisions he can't carry on the field / than to get
drunk on *ql*.)

The reason for this counsel appears to be more of a practical than of a moral nature. As we can see, the following stanza in the poem clarifies the reason for this recommendation; and the reason appears to be that he who is travelling needs to be constantly aware of the intentions of those who surround him. Alertness should have

¹⁰⁹³ Saxo Grammaticus, *Saxonis Gesta Danorum I: Texum Continens*, ed. by J. Olrik & H. Ræder, 2 vols (Kopenhagen: Hauniæ, Apud Librarios Levin & Munksgaard, 1931), p. 5.

¹⁰⁹⁴ *The History of the Danes, Preface IV, 5*. Translation by Peter Fisher.

¹⁰⁹⁵ Even if the *Gnomic Poem*, where these stanzas are contained, is believed to have been written in pre-Christian Norway (see Evans, 'Háv', in *Medieval Scandinavia*, ed. by Pulsiano, p. 272) it may somehow reflect the ethos or some of the concerns of Icelandic society, where it was written down in the late thirteenth century.

¹⁰⁹⁶ *Háv* 11.

been of great importance for the person who, while travelling, finds lodging in a place where he is most probably surrounded by strangers and, perhaps, some enemies.

*Era svá gott, sem gott qveða,
ql alda sona;
þvíat færa veit, er fleira dreccr,
sins til geðs gumi.¹⁰⁹⁷*

(It is not as good as it is said to be / *ql*, for the sons of men / because the less he knows, he who more drinks, / his mind from that of other men.)

From this last stanza we perceive that temperance, at least when among strangers, was a recommended ideal as people needed to remain aware and be able to interpret the context in which they found themselves. Sobriety was considered intrinsically linked to awareness, and it was essential to find out if one was sitting among friends or foes. As the poem puts it: “*Opt vito ógqrla, þeir er sitia inni fyrir, / hvers þeir ro kyns, er koma*”¹⁰⁹⁸ (Often they don’t fully know, those who sit in [the hall?]) / whose kinsmen are those who come.) and this can also well apply to travellers who arrive to a hall, they do not really know whose kinsmen are sitting inside. As a matter of fact, the possibility of sitting and lodging among strangers was very real at the time and being among enemies without knowing seems to have been a vital risk. As Theodore M Andersson puts it, “all these precepts deal with excess and illustrate on a much less abstract and more practical level the sort of negative ideal urged by the sagas [...] what this section [of *Hávamál*] shares with the sagas is an awareness of the community in which the individual lives.”¹⁰⁹⁹ Accordingly the first piece of advice to be given in *Hávamál* refers to this concern:

*Gáttir allar aðr gangi fram,
um scoðaz scyli,
um scygnaz scyli;
þvíat óvist er at vita hvar óvinir
sitia á fleti fyrir.¹¹⁰⁰*

¹⁰⁹⁷ *Háv* 12.

¹⁰⁹⁸ *Háv* 133.

¹⁰⁹⁹ Theodore M. Andersson, “The Displacement of the Heroic Ideal in the Family Sagas”, in *Speculum*, 45:4. (1970), pp. 575-93 (p. 590).

¹¹⁰⁰ *Háv* 1.

(All the doorways, before you walk forward, / one should look at, / one should spy, / because it is not known for certain where enemies / sit ahead in the hall.)

It seems then, that remaining sober and aware was essential for survival in a society in which the duty of revenge could, and did, extend almost indefinitely within the kin group of the person to be avenged and where vengeance could be wreaked on any member of the family of the murderer. It was necessary to know who one's companions were and to be able to spot any signs of hostility; *Hávamál* mentions sobriety as one tool to gain this knowledge.

Furthermore, another major objection that the poem has against drunkenness is that:

*Kópir afglapi, er til kynnis kóm,
þylsc hann um eða þrumir;
alt er senn, ef han sylg um getr,
uppi er þá geð guma.¹¹⁰¹*

(The fool gapes when he comes on a visit / he mutters to himself or sits fast, / all happens at once, if he gets a drink / then his mind is exposed.)

According to the poem, being drunk was considered a disadvantage since drunken men are not only unable to recognize other people's intentions but are also unable to conceal their thoughts and may even render themselves unconscious. Both situations would allow others to have power over them. On the other hand, as we have already seen in the section devoted to gift-giving, refusing to drink less than other men at a hall or feast could also be considered an insult or an act of treachery, as the man who remained sober then had control over those who became drunk.¹¹⁰² Remaining sober while among drunkards was often seen as suspicious. *Hávamál* offers the solution to the dilemma of how much to drink at the end of its section on advice to travellers, provided in stanzas 1-19. The poem closes this section by saying:

Haldit maðr á keru, drecci þó at hófi miqð,

¹¹⁰¹ *Háv* 17.

¹¹⁰² See above, section 6.1.

*mæli þarft eða þegi;
ókynnis þess vár þic engi maðr,
at þú gangir snemma at sofa.¹¹⁰³*

(A man shall not hold on to the goblet, he shall drink *miqð* in moderation, / he shall speak useful things or be silent, / of bad manners no one blames you / that you go early to sleep.)

In general, drunkenness is portrayed in the written sources as an instrument of power in three different ways. First, as we have already seen in the case of *Hávamál*, drunkenness could be a tool to make people expose their intentions as well as a way by which someone could render a person unaware of the fact that trouble may be brewing or plots against him are getting thicker. A second portrayal is using drunkenness as a tool to influence people's minds, either by persuading them to make certain oaths and/or promises while they are under the influence of alcohol¹¹⁰⁴ or by inducing a certain degree of amnesia due to overindulgence.¹¹⁰⁵ Finally, the most common use portrayed in the literature is to render the enemy extremely drunk or unconscious with alcohol in order to attack or deceive him.

Alcohol as an instrument to influence people's minds seems to occur most often in the *Fornaldar sǫgur*, which could be expected since this saga genre contains more references to alcohol than the *Sturlunga saga* compilation and *Íslendinga sǫgur*. Even if the *Fornaldar sǫgur* are fictional and rather untrustworthy when it comes to a historical analysis, they can cast some light on the perceptions and uses of alcohol in the society that created them. Taking into account that the sagas were both read or recited out loud for an audience one can expect a certain degree of identification between members of the audience and the saga characters.¹¹⁰⁶ The slaves in the audience could visualize

¹¹⁰³ *Háv* 19.

¹¹⁰⁴ Oath-swearing has been studied in section 6.3.

¹¹⁰⁵ This could be achieved by the ingestion of magic beverages. See section 7.1.

¹¹⁰⁶ A good example of sagas being read out-loud as entertainment comes from *ÞorSk*. Here, on occasion of a journey to Hrafnagil "*honum var kostur á boðinn, hvat til gamans skyldi hafa, sögur eða dans, um kveldit. Hann spurði, hverjar sögur í vali væri. Honum var sagt, at til væri saga Tómass erkibiskups, ok kaus han hana [...] Var þá lesin sagan.*" (*ÞorSk* LXXV, p. 218.) (he [Þorgill] was asked to choose which entertainment to have during the night: sagas or dance. He asked which sagas were there to choose. He was told there was the saga of Archbishop Tómas, and he chose it. [...] Then the saga was read.)

themselves as the freed slave in the saga, the freemen in the audience could have imagined themselves as the invincible warrior in the text. Following Lars Lönnroth one can say that

The scene of action in sagas and Eddic poems often corresponds to the kind of scene where sagas and Eddic poems are said to have been performed, according to medieval sources. There are thus many Eddic poems and saga episodes dealing with various types of recitations, games, contests and other entertainments at the drinking table, usually in some kind of large hall with benches, high seats and other stage props suggesting a feast of courtly dimensions. And we know from numerous sources that this was the kind of social context in which such texts were in fact performed, even though the performance was more likely to take place in the farmhouse [*skáli*] of a chieftain than in a royal hall [*hǫll*].¹¹⁰⁷

The parallelism between the action scenes in the *Fornaldar sǫgur* and the scenario in which they were read or performed could thus have led to a certain degree of identification between the drinkers in the text and the drinkers in the audience. This kind of rapport is better known as a 'double scene', which is "something that occurs in the course of an oral performance whenever the narrative appears to be enacted by the performer or his audience on the very spot where the entertainment takes place."¹¹⁰⁸ Since the saga actions concerning the use of alcohol to influence people's minds often take place within a hall, we can expect a certain degree of empathy or identification on the part of the audience at the hall or farmhouse where the text was being read. After all, the risk of being manipulated while drunk was a peril that both legendary heroes and real life men could confront.

A clear example of this manipulative use of drunkenness can be found in *Qrvar-Odds saga*. In his saga we find two different attitudes towards drinking: the first one is the case of Qrvar-Oddr, a legendary hero, who is travelling in disguise as a thrall and the second, that of Óttarr and Ingjaldr, two actual thralls that he befriends. At the hall of

Similarly, on occasion of a wedding at Reykjaholt we are told that the entertainment was "*margs konar leikar, bæði dansleikar, glimur ok sagnaskemmtan.*" (*ÞorHaf X*, p. 27) (many kinds of entertainment; dancing, wrestling and saga-telling). On this occasion the sagas seem to be recited instead of read, which is irrelevant for my argument. What proves relevant is the fact that the sagas recited at this last feast – even if some of them do not survive – belonged to the genre of the *Fornaldar sǫgur*.

¹¹⁰⁷ Lönnroth, 'Double Scene', p. 96.

¹¹⁰⁸ Lönnroth, 'Double Scene', p. 96.

the king Qrvar-Oddr's behaviour is well in agreement with the advice for travellers given in *Hávamál*: “*Nú sitr Næframaðr þar ok drekkur jafnan lítit um kveldin ok leggst snemma niðr. Svá ferr fram, þar til er menn skulu fara á dýraveiðarnar. Þat var um haustit.*”¹¹⁰⁹ (Now the Birch-man [i.e. Qrvar-Odd] sits there and drinks very little in the evening and goes early to bed. He continued doing so until the men should go hunting. That was in the autumn.) As a hero, he behaves like a role model when it comes to drinking. On the other hand the slaves Óttarr and Ingjaldr behave in the exact opposite way:

*Þat var einhverri aftan, þá er konungr er út genginn til svefnis, at þeir rísa upp Sigurðr ok Sjólftr ok gengu með sitt horn hvárr þeira ok bjóðu þeim at drekka bræðrum, Óttari ok Ingjaldr, ok báðu þá at taka við ok drekka af. Ok er þeir höfðu af drukkit, þá kómu þeir með önnur tvau, ok taka þeir við ok drekka.*¹¹¹⁰

(It happened on a certain evening, when the king had left and gone to sleep, that Sigurðr and Sjólftr stood up and went with their horns towards the brothers Óttarr and Ingjaldr and offered them a drink. And when they had drunk the horns, then they brought another two and Óttarr and Ingjaldr drank them.)

The brothers are aware that their attitude is not the most recommendable, as they say that Qrvar-Oddr prefers to go early to bed because “*þat þykkir honum vænligra en at drekka frá sér vit allt, sem vér gerum.*”¹¹¹¹ (he thinks it is more promising than to drink his wits out of himself, as we do.) Sigurðr and Sjólftr make use of the fact that Óttarr and Ingjaldr are drunk to convince them to enter into a bet in which the thralls appear to be in a clear disadvantage. After the terms of the bet have been set “*sofa þeir af nóttina. En um morgininn, er þeir vakna bræðr, þá kemr þeim í hug, at eigi væri allsvinnlig veðjan þeira orðin.*”¹¹¹² (they went to sleep through the night. And in the morning when the brothers woke up they came to their minds and realized that their wager was not a very wise one.) The lesson of this episode seems to be that foolish men do not know how to drink, especially because a few days later the same scene is repeated.

¹¹⁰⁹ Qrv XXV, p. 303.

¹¹¹⁰ Qrv XXVI, p. 305.

¹¹¹¹ Qrv XXVI, p. 306.

¹¹¹² Qrv XXVI, p. 306.

Nú liða nokkurir dagar, ok var þat enn eitt kveld, sem konungr er út genginn, at þeir Sigurðr ok Sjólftr ganga með sitt horn hvárr þeira ok bjóða þeim Óttari ok Ingjaldr. Þeir drekka af. Síðan færa þeir þeim önnur tvau.

Þá mælti Sjólftr: 'Enn liggir Næframaðr ok drekkir ekki.'
*'Hann mun betr síðaðr en þú um allt,' sagði Ingjaldr.*¹¹¹³

(Now some days passed, and it happened one evening, when the king had left, that Sigurðr and Sjólftr went each one with his horn and offered them to Óttarr and Ingjaldr. They drank them up. Then they brought them two more.

Then Sjólftr said: 'The Barkman is still lying down and not drinking.'
'He must be better behaved than you' said Ingjaldr.)

And a third time:

Þat var eitt kveld, þá er konungr var til svefns farinn, at þeir Sjólftr ok Sigurðr ganga útar fyrir þá bræðr ok færa þeim horn tvau, ok drukku þeir af þeim.

Þá tók Sjólftr til orða: "Liggir Oddr inn mikli?"

*"Já," segja þeir, "þat er svinnligr en at drekka frá sér vitit allt, sem vér gerum."*¹¹¹⁴

(It happened one evening, when the king had gone to sleep, that Sjólftr and Sigurðr went to the brothers and took them two horns, and they drank them up.

Then Sjólftr said: "Is the great Oddr laying down?"

"Yes," they said, "that is more sensible than to drink our wits out of ourselves, as we do")

On this occasion the brothers end up making an even worse bet, wagering their heads against two golden rings.

These episodes seem to be an exemplum aimed at the audience, emphasising the risks of excessive alcohol consumption. This does not mean that people in the audience did not drink their wits out of themselves; in fact overindulgence in alcohol was probably a problem, even if limited only to great feasts or social occasions, so that the composer decided to include a didactic episode.¹¹¹⁵ This passage seems to be of a didactic nature due to the constant contrast and comparisons between Qrvar-Oddr's and the brothers' attitude towards drinking. On each occasion in which they are drinking themselves witless, Óttarr and Ingjaldr still have enough sense to recognize that Qrvar-

¹¹¹³ Qrv XXVI, p. 307.

¹¹¹⁴ Qrv XXVII, p. 310.

¹¹¹⁵ We cannot discard a the possibility that the large amount of alcohol available and overindulgence in this passage may be an element of wish-fulfilment, a way, perhaps of idealizing a glorious past in which alcohol could be found in excess so that even thralls could have their share. However, the easiness with which the thralls become drunk – thus showing that they were not used to drink – as well as the didactic tone of the passage leads me to think that the episode was intended as an exemplum.

Oddr's decision to drink little and go early to bed is more sensible and reflects better habits. But the second lesson this exemplum seems to be teaching is that people who drink in excess put themselves under the control of other people and risk being abused or even losing their lives. And this seems to happen only to those who stay up drinking late, after all the sensible men have gone to bed.

A further example of how he who stays up drinking late can be an easy target for treachery occurs in *Vqlsunga saga*. In it King Gunnarr stays drinking for a while after the rest of the court had gone to sleep. Then Vingi talks him into going to visit King Atli as, he says, Atli wants to put him in charge of his kingdom. Gunnarr is not aware of the fact that this is a deceitful plot because: "*Nú var bæði, at Gunnarr var mjök drukkinn, en boðit mikit ríki, mátti ok eigi við sköpum vinna, heitr nú ferðinni ok segir Högna bróður sínum. Hann svarar: 'Yðart atkvæði mun standa hljóta, ok fylgja mun ek þér, en ófús em ek þessarar ferðar.'*"¹¹¹⁶ (Now it happened that Gunnarr was very drunk and offered much power, he could not escape his destiny; he now promised to make the journey and told this to Hqgni, his brother. He answered: 'Your oath must stand, and I must follow you, and unwilling am I to do this journey.') King Gunnarr was so drunk that he was unable to read another person's mind; he was unable to distinguish a treacherous plot from a trusty one. Eventually his drunkenness ended up costing him his sense and with it his own life (and that of his more sensible brother, Hógni too) at the hands of Atli.

However, one's drunkenness and lack of wits could also be used as a tool in one's favour, as we can see in *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*. In this, King Hrólfur visits King Eiríkr in order to ask for his daughter's hand. King Eiríkr receives him with a feast at which "*váru þá tekin borð ok vist ok drykk inn borinn. Ok er þeir höfðu drukkit um hrið, váru margir vel kátir. Hrólfur konungur var heldr hljóðr ok fátalaðr.*"¹¹¹⁷ (the

¹¹¹⁶ *Vqls* XXXIII, p. 201.

¹¹¹⁷ *HG* VIII, p. 74.

tables were laid and provided with food and the drink was carried in. And when they had drunk for a while then they were very merry. King Hrólfr was thoughtful and in silence.) Hrólfr's silence and thoughtfulness might imply that he remained sober; after all he was a legendary hero and hence a role model, in contrast to King Eiríkr, who unleashes a plethora of insults aimed at Hrólfr as soon as he raises the topic of marrying his daughter. The next day King Eiríkr realizes that he did wrong in insulting such a powerful king as Hrólfr and pretends not to remember the previous night's conversation with the excuse that he was drunk:

Byrjar þat eigi várri konungligri tign at mæla nema á góðan hátt við jafnvirðuligan höfðingja sem þú ert, ok ef vér höfum þat nokkut talat, at yðr mislíki, þá mun þat satt sem mælt er, at öl er annarr maðr. Viljum vér þat allt með skynsemi aprt taka ok láta sem ómælt sé.¹¹¹⁸

(It does not correspond to our royal status to say nothing but good things about such a magnificent leader as you are, and if we have such things said, as to offend you, then it proves the saying that *öl* is another man¹¹¹⁹. We want to take all that back now that we have our reason back and let it be as if it was never spoken.)

King Hrólfr seems to understand that the insults were spoken by a drunken man and decides to not take offence. On this occasion Eiríkr manages to make use of his own drunkenness to his advantage. Meanwhile Hrólfr's attitude seems to be according to one of the counsels given by Brynhildr to Sigurðr in *Vqlsunga saga*: "*ef þú heyrir heimsleg orð drukkinna manna, deil eigi við þá, er vindrukknir eru ok tapa viti sínu. Slikir hlutir verða mörgum at miklum móðtrega eða bana.*"¹¹²⁰ (if you hear foolish words from drunken men, do not quarrel with those who are drunk on wine and lose their wits. Such things increase the sorrows of many and even lead to death.) Drunken words come from witless persons, and so it is better if they are ignored. An episode bearing some resemblance to that in *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* can be found in *Íslendinga saga*. Here, just before swearing an oath to Sturla Þórðason Gizurr states: "*en þat mun ek*

¹¹¹⁸ *HG IX*, p. 79.

¹¹¹⁹ *Öl er annarr maðr*. Literally 'öl is another man' can be interpreted as 'öl makes another man.' This proverb appears also in *GrXIX*, p. 66.

¹¹²⁰ *Vqls XXI*, p. 163.

segja fyrir eið minn, at el skal til þín aldri öfugt orð mæla ódrukkinn.”¹¹²¹ (and I shall say this before I take my oath, that I shall never speak harsh words against you while [I am] not drunk.”) It seems as if drunkenness and its subsequent loss of wits could be taken as an excuse for men to speak their minds without any consequences. This is an interesting fact. On one hand *Hávamál* warns men against drunkenness because it could lead them to expose their mind, thus revealing, maybe secret intentions or a secret sense of contempt against someone. On the other hand, the examples in the sagas seem to imply that the words of a drunken man were not to be taken seriously, even if they reveal a concealed hatred.

It is possible to find a pattern in the *Fornaldar sqgur* episodes involving drunkenness as a tool to mould people’s minds. That is, the hero usually knows when to stop drinking, while those characters who are portrayed as weaker or dishonourable do not know how to control their drinking and hence they are more likely to be manipulated. If the idea of the double scene does really apply to these drinking scenes, one can gather that there was a certain concern on the side of the authors to include brief exempla in their texts. These presented the hero and role model as someone who showed moderation at the table. This can, in a certain way, lead us to believe that medieval Icelanders were not as temperate as Saxo Grammaticus imagined them to be, since the motif of the foolish drunkard is so frequent. However, since scenes of drunkenness appear more frequently in the *Fornaldar sqgur* than in other saga genres, the possibility exists that binge-drinking was yet another unusual or fabulous event, like the ones portrayed in the legendary sagas. Overindulgence in alcohol belonged to the realm of the fantastic, while contemporary Icelanders still had to struggle and spend large amounts of wealth in order to throw a grand feast.

¹¹²¹ *Ísl* CXXIX, p. 414.

Rendering one's enemy drunk and/or unconscious in order to attack or deceive him is one of the most common ways in which the literature portrays the use of alcohol as an instrument of power. However, this seems to be more a motif of the *Fornaldar sqgur*, where it happens relatively often, than of the *Íslendinga sqgur* and *Sturlunga saga* where it basically does not occur at all. These episodes of drunkenness tend to happen at feasts and in halls, which were the occasions and settings in which alcohol ran more freely than it did on a daily basis. It is interesting to note that this type of representation of drunkenness as a means to dispose of an enemy occurs most frequently in a group of sagas that are mainly legendary tales of the past. Even if the *Fornaldar sqgur* cannot be considered as historical sources they can provide some hints about the mentality of the period in which they were written down. As Torfi Tulinius puts it, "the legendary sagas, despite their fictional nature, teach us about Icelandic society –not as it was, but as it saw itself, and above all as it wished to be."¹¹²² In other words, even if the *Fornaldar sqgur* were the genre in which the authors presented their idealized and romanticized vision of the past, these characteristics also made them the ideal vehicle to denounce, in a concealed way, the decadence of the Sturlung age. And the thirteenth century, during which most of them were committed to parchment, was precisely a century in which the struggle for power led to great acts of violence in Iceland. The *Sturlunga saga* compilation, almost contemporary with the period in which the *Fornaldar sqgur* were written down, depicts several acts of violence against people inside their halls, where they were probably drinking. This might then explain why both groups of sagas present the motif of killing the enemy while he is drunk.

For example, in *Íslendinga saga*, Órækja goes with a group of men in order to attack Gizurr's farm. On the way some men ask for information about Gizurr and learn that he is hosting a feast where large amounts of alcohol are being served. The group's

¹¹²² Tulinius, p. 13.

reaction is one of joy: “*Drekki þeir, drekki þeir ok bíði vár svá.*”¹¹²³ (They are drinking, they are drinking and they wait for us like that.) The group’s reaction is understandable, for they know that if they are to fight against drunken men the victory will most probably be on their side. *Sturlu saga* narrates an episode when, during a feast “*Aðalríkr var þar kominn ok reikaði á golfi. En er hann kom fyrir Skeggja, þá brá hann öxi undan skikkju ok hjó í höfuð honum, svá at öxin sökk*”¹¹²⁴ (Aðalríkr had come and tottered on the floor. And when he got in front of Skeggi, then he quickly got an axe from under his cloak and struck him in the head so that the axe sank.) Aðalríkr manages to escape from the place in spite of doing this deed in front of a large amount of people. Perhaps this was due to the inability of men to react due to alcohol consumption. In general, drunken men are depicted as easy targets.

Perhaps one of the most famous murder scenes in the *Íslendinga sǫgur* is that of *Gísla saga*, when Gísli Súrsson avenges Vésteinn, his brother-in-law, by killing Þorgrímr, his other brother-in-law. Gísli waits until Þorgrímr arranges a winter feast at which over sixty guests arrive. Then “*tóku menn til drykkju um kveldit, ok fara menn í rekkjur eptir þat ok sofa.*”¹¹²⁵ (The men started drinking in the evening, and after that they went to bed and slept.) Later that night Gísli goes to Sæból, Þorgrímr’s farm, and exploits the fact that all the guests are asleep in order to murder Þorgrímr in his sleep. Gísli manages to escape because “*menn allir váru qlærir á Sæbóli ok vissu eigi, hvat af skyldi ráða; kom þetta á þá óvara, ok urðu því eigi tekin þau ráð, sem dygði eða þarf var á.*”¹¹²⁶ (all the men at Sæból were *ql*-mad and no one knew what to suggest; this happened unexpectedly, and so no one was able to provide any idea that could be of any help or use.) The saga does not tell us if Þorgrímr is just as drunk as his retinue is at the time of his death. However, Þorgrímr’s unawareness of Gísli fondling both him and his

¹¹²³ *Ísl* CLV, p. 459.

¹¹²⁴ *Sturl* IV, p. 66.

¹¹²⁵ *Gísl* XVI, p. 52.

¹¹²⁶ *Gísl* XVI, p. 54.

wife in their sleep just before he is killed may lead us to think that he is not completely sober.¹¹²⁷ In any case, what is relevant in this scene is that all the men in the farm are so drunk as to not know what is the most logical action to take once the murder is discovered. They had drunk their wits out and so rendered themselves powerless in the hands of the enemy. Similarly, in *Þórðar saga hreðu* King Sigurðr is easily killed at a feast while sitting at the drinking table (*drykkjuborð*) and the most of the killers manage to escape unharmed due to the inability of the king's retinue to capture them.¹¹²⁸

The strategy of rendering the enemy unconscious with alcohol in order to kill or abuse them is found more often in the *Fornaldar sagur*, a genre in which alcohol is not portrayed as a rare and expensive commodity. The way in which this trick is generally depicted can be illustrated through an example given in *Hrólfs saga kraka*. In it Helgi and Hróarr (aged ten and twelve respectively) go secretly to King Fróði's hall in order to kill him and thus avenge their father. On his side, the king, worried about the possibility of Helgi and Hróarr avenging Hálfðan, their father, asks a secess to tell him about the boys. She warns him:

*Sé ek, hvar sitja synir Hálfðanar,
Hróarr ok Helgi, heilir báðir;
Þeir munu Fróða fjörvi ræna.*¹¹²⁹

[I see where the sons of Hálfðan sit, /
Hróarr and Helgi, both healthy, / they
will plunder the vital parts of Fróði.]

The boys are then discovered and flee the hall while the king's men chase them in vain. Believing himself out of danger, the king then says: “*En drekka munum vér nú mega kveldlangt' [...]* Reginn gengr at byrja mönnum ok bar á þá ölit með ákafa ok margir aðrir með honum, vinir hans, svá at þar fell hverr um þveran annan niðr sofandi.”¹¹³⁰ (“And now we are able to drink all night long.’ [...] Reginn waits upon the men and

¹¹²⁷ See *Gísl* XVI, pp. 52-54.

¹¹²⁸ See *Þórð* I, pp. 166-67.

¹¹²⁹ *Hrólfr* III, p. 9.

¹¹³⁰ *Hrólfr* III, p. 10.

eagerly serves them *ql*, and so do the other men, his friends, that help him in the task, so that all the men at the feast fall asleep there, one after the other.”)

The boys then take advantage of the drunkenness of the king’s retinue and set fire to the hall, where all the men lie unable to react since due to their drunkenness they do not realize that the hall is burning. Similarly, in *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka* we are told about an attack during a feast: “*veizla var kappsamlig ok drykkir svá sterkr, at Hálfsrekkar sofnuðu fast. Ásmundr konungr ok hirðin lögðu eld í höllina.*”¹¹³¹ (the feast was intense and the drink so strong the *Hálfsrekkar* [King Hálfr’s champions] fell fast asleep. King Ásmundr and his men set fire to the hall.) And in *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* we hear that “*þeir sátu við drykk gláðir ok kátir. Heyra þeir út gný mikinn ok vápnbrak, ok því næst var borinn eldr at skemmumni þeiri, er þeir sátu inni,*”¹¹³² (they sat at drink and were cheerful and merry. They heard a great roar and the din of weapons outside, and then the building in which they were sitting was on fire.) The list of events in which people are attacked while drunk or drinking could continue, most instances resembling the ones just presented. In general, attacking someone while drunk would render that person defenceless and this situation seems to have been exploited, at least in literature, to defeat men and groups of men that could not be otherwise overcome.

However, the use of alcohol as an instrument of deceit did not necessarily have to end in death. Sometimes it could be used in order to render another person unconscious. In *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, for example, it is used by a princess who is planning to run away from her captors. She achieves it in the following fashion:

*Þetta sama kveld gerði konungsdóttir sík blíða við menn sína ok veitti þeim kappsamliga. Hún gerði allar sínar skemmumeyjar svá drukknaðar, at þær fellu sofnar niðr, en er skammt var af nótt, kom Hrólfr í kastalann ok hitti konungsdóttur ok bað hana búna með sér at fara.*¹¹³³

(That same night the king’s daughter acted gently towards her men and served them with liberality. She got all her maids so drunk that they fell

¹¹³¹ *Hálf XII*, p. 114.

¹¹³² *HG XXXV*, pp. 169-70.

¹¹³³ *GHR XXI*, p. 218.

down asleep and, early during the night, Hrólfr came to the castle and found the princess and asked her to get ready to go with him.)

The Princess' gentleness towards her men as well as her liberal pouring of drinks are done with the intention of rendering everyone in the castle unconscious, thus facilitating her escape. Similarly, in the same saga Gqngu-Hrólfr becomes the victim of a similar trick when drinking with a group of farmers. They serve the drinks liberally and "*er Hrólfr gerðist drukkinn, vildi han fara at sofa*"¹¹³⁴ but "*en er liðin var nóttinn, vaknaði Hrólfr ok eigi við goðan draum, því at hann var bundinn at höndum ok fótum.*"¹¹³⁵ (when it was late at night Hrólfr woke up, and not after a good dream, because he was tied both at his hands and feet.) Gqngu-Hrólfr was indeed famed for being an extremely strong man and a great warrior so that the only object capable of defeating him was not a sword or a spear but alcohol and inebriation. This seems to have been also a common method to overcome an enemy, or it could even be used for sexual abuse, as we can see in the eddic poem *Vqlundarkviða*. The poem tells about Vqlundr's revenge on King Níðuðr by killing his sons and abusing his daughter. He achieves this last act because "*Bar hann hana bióri, þvíat hann bettr kunni, / svá at hón í sessi um sofnaði.*"¹¹³⁶ (He defeated her with *bjórr* because he was more used to it / so that she fell asleep on the bench.) Again, alcohol-induced unconsciousness is used a tool to deceive someone.

In general, we have seen that drunkenness could be used as a tool to overpower or deceive one's enemies, especially those who could not be defeated while sober. This could be done in different ways. One way could be using the effects of alcohol over people's minds, by rendering them witless so that they could be easily manipulated. A second way was taking advantage of others' drunkenness in order to attack them, as a drunken man can not defend himself so easily, if at all. A third way was by rendering someone else unconscious in order to defeat them. On most occasions these methods

¹¹³⁴ *GHr* XIII, p. 194.

¹¹³⁵ *GHr* XIII, p. 194.

¹¹³⁶ *Vkv* 28.

are presented as a way of defeating a person who could not be overcome by weapons. *Hávamál* shows great concern about these dangers so that it opens with a series of recommendations about how a person shall remain sober, at least while among strangers. It is also noteworthy that most of the occurrences of drunkenness as an instrument of power come from the *Fornaldar sqgur*. This could be due to the fact that this literary genre was probably a vehicle to express current social concerns, one of which was the possibility of being attacked or abused while inebriated. It could also be due to the fact that these legendary sagas have more reference to alcohol consumption than the *Íslendinga sqgur* and the *Sturlunga saga* compilation. The pseudo-historicity of these last two saga genres may be the reason why the *Fornaldar sqgur* have more references to alcohol consumption and its use as an instrument for deception. After all, as we have already seen, alcohol was not abundant in medieval Iceland and Norway, so its uses and dangers were, perhaps, a topic more fitting for the legendary realms.

CONCLUSIONS

As we have seen in the previous pages, alcoholic beverages in the West Norse world were a rare and expensive commodity. Thus, the many comments I received in the course of my research about the 'Vikings being binge drinkers who normally overindulged in mead' seem to be groundless. Mead, at least by the time our sources were written down, was rarely drunk. However, it had a special place in the literature referring to the remote past as well as a symbolic role in myth and in poetry.

In general, the high costs involved in alcohol production conferred on all beverages a symbolic value. Drinking, in literature and in reality, it seems, had a symbolic role that superseded its biological nature. When thirsty, people drank milk or water on a regular basis; thus these two drinks are basically absent from the literature. But alcohol, even if consumed in order to quench thirst, seems to have been consumed symbolically. Each drink and each kind of vessel had its own added value. The same applies to the locations where alcohol was consumed. As we could see, whether in a hall or at a tavern the act of offering alcohol added to the status of the provider. Due to its cost, alcohol became a symbol of wealth and power. It helped to display wealth either through offering feasts or by providing costly beverages in expensive drinking vessels; it also helped to gain allegiances through gift-giving, as alcohol was a gift that could not be easily repaid. But most of all, alcohol helped to enhance people's power through the sense of community created during drinking occasions. Alcohol could also increase a person's power through demonstrations of manliness during drinking competitions, *mannjafnaðar* and boasting bouts while drunk. However, its negative aspects are also portrayed in the literature. That is, namely, as a tool to render a person powerless both by inebriation and through magic alcohol consumption.

Concerning the questions that I asked at the beginning of this study about the what, where, when, how and why of drinking we can extract the following answers. The

most common alcoholic beverages were lactose-based; the fact that they were a quite mundane product, added to their extremely acidic flavour, turned them into the most despicable of beverages. Therefore, they are not often the subject of literature, as they appear to be unworthy of entering the world of sagas. And when they do appear in literature they are often associated with villains and are seldom said to be consumed; instead they are used for other purposes, such as hiding or extinguishing fires. Maltose-based beverages are the most commonly mentioned ones in all the written sources. This is perhaps due to the fact that they could be easily produced, stored and transported. Thus, with the advent of the Hanseatic League maltose-based beverages were imported into Scandinavia from countries where cereals could be easily produced. Among these beverages there are frequent references to *mungát*, which seems to be some sort of strong *ql*. This might mean that *mungát* was actually a beverage of a mixed nature, several different kinds of sugar being added in order to fortify it. There are, however, no clues to its exact nature. Glucose-based beverages, especially *mjqðr*, seem to have been outdated in the North, most probably due to their high cost. This might have made *mjqðr* the most prestigious beverage until it was replaced by *vín*, another extremely expensive beverage that had the added advantages of being exotic but perhaps ready at hand in the Continent. Wine, it seems, ended up replacing mead not only as the most prestigious drink in this world, but also in the otherworld, as it is said to be Óðinn's only nourishment. Beverages of a mixed nature, such as *bjórr*, are seldom mentioned, and seem to have been outdated by the time our sources were written down. Thus, *ql*, *mungát* and *vín* are the most frequently mentioned, but, as we have seen, not often consumed.

The mythology clearly reflects the situation concerning alcohol in reality: the gods, just like mankind, had to struggle in order to obtain alcoholic beverages. Apart from the mythical goat *Heiðrún*, who is an endless source of mead, there are no other

alcohol sources in Ásgarðr. Regardless of the fact that the gods owned this goat, they often are said to travel in order to obtain their alcoholic beverages, making little use of Heiðrún. Just like ordinary people, the gods must also import their drinks or consume it elsewhere than in Ásgarðr. Mead, the drink associated with Valhǫll and considered as the origin of the poetic language, is said to have been stolen from the *Jǫtunnar*. This myth relates what seems to be a Prometheus-like tale about how alcohol came into the possession of the gods. There are, however, discrepancies in the different sources for this myth. According to Snorri this mead has the characteristic that it turns men into scholars and/or poets. However, the myth as related in the *Poetic Edda*, without making use of Snorri in order to interpret it, seems to relate quite a different story. In it the mead is a regular beverage; it does not confer any special abilities apart from inebriation and loss of consciousness, just like any other alcoholic beverage. Thus, it seems that Snorri's *Edda* narrated a different myth about mead than that of *Hávamál*, or that by the time the myth reached Snorri it had evolved or was misunderstood by him. The actual confusion between both myths seems to come from a generalized tendency to utilize Snorri's *Edda* in order to interpret the *Eddic* lays and vice versa.

The main places where alcohol was consumed were drinking halls, taverns and at the Althing. Drinking halls, even if similar in nature were linguistically differentiated. *Hallar* were the drinking places owned by the nobility and, therefore, absent in Iceland. Drinking halls in Iceland as well as those owned by farmers in Norway were called *skálar*. As we saw, the sole difference between *hallar* and *skálar* was symbolic rather than architectural. Within the hall seating places were also symbolically allotted, with each seat representing the position that each of the attendants had in society. Within the hall, the most honourable place was the *hásæti* or *qndvegi*. Again, both these places were similar in esteem, the only difference being that a high-seat was only to be found in Norwegian *hallar*, that is, they were seats reserved for the nobility; meanwhile the

qndvegi was the place of highest esteem in *skálar*, as no farmer could – regardless of his wealth and power – could occupy a *hásæti*. With the development of towns in Norway a new kind of drinking establishment appeared. These new drinking places were called *skytningar* or *hjúkólfar*. Their role was basically to shelter the growing floating population of merchants that arrived in Norway. The Crown seems to have favoured these places not only to take the drinkers out of the streets, but also because alcohol sales in these establishments were easier to control and tax. As we have seen, Icelanders travelling in Norway seem to have followed in these establishments a similar ethos to that which they were expected to follow in Icelandic drinking halls. In Iceland and in Norway people seem to have also gathered to drink at the national and local assemblies, which might have led to quarrels or difficulties reaching agreements; accordingly, there were several attempts to control alcohol intake at these locations.

The main drinking occasions were weddings, funerals and seasonal feasts. It is not rare to find weddings and funerals being celebrated simultaneously in the sagas, perhaps as a reflection of an actual social practice at the time. One possible explanation is that this was done due to the high cost of alcohol. Thus, the host, taking into consideration the large sums involved in feast-offering, tried to spare by combining celebrations. Weddings are said to have taken place mainly in midsummer and at the beginning of winter. This may be due to the fact that these were the seasons of abundance. Both during midsummer and the start of winter merchants were travelling back and forth to Norway and the Continent, bringing raw materials that could be used for brewing. Also, at the start of winter the livestock surplus was sacrificed in order to ensure the survival of the rest of the farm animals throughout the cold months. Finally, at the beginning of winter all agrarian activity stopped, allowing people to spend more time at leisure.

The how and why of alcohol consumption correspond, as I mentioned earlier, more to the realm of the symbolic than the biological. Festive drinking is, in many cultures, a way of creating a community. But in Iceland and Norway the high cost of alcohol gave these occasions an added value; they became symbols of power and wealth. Thus, alcohol and feast-hosting seem to have played an important role in the Norse gift-giving culture, though alcohol and feasts were gifts difficult to pay back. Only the rich could afford to throw a fortnight-long feast. And there seem to have been some troubles arising from the decision of who was to host a feast, as it seems to have been the role of the most powerful person. Thus, possible candidates sometimes clashed, not wanting to recognize the supremacy of the other. During feasts wealth and power were also displayed through the ostentation of costly drinking vessels. These kinds of vessels are rare archaeological finds, which only seems to confirm the great esteem they have in literature. *Mannjafnaðar* and other drinking games were also a way of displaying someone's personal assets, not only through the boasting of the contestant's personal achievements but also through the ability to remain sober. Sobriety seems to have been a much valued asset. In literature and myth it appears as a personal quality of the greatest of men while, on most occasions, it is only the most wretched that appear as binge drinkers. This may be due to the other, and more sinister, way in which alcohol is depicted. Drunkenness is depicted as a tool of power as it makes people lose their wits. Thus, in literature many a hero who is otherwise invincible can only be defeated while drunk. Drunkenness is also depicted as a way of rendering someone unconscious and turning him or her into an easy victim. Magic alcoholic beverages seem to have a similar role. Many of these drinks have exactly the same properties as alcohol, affecting people's memory and emotions, but the effect can be achieved with only a few drops.

In general, most of the sources coincide in their depiction of alcohol. Literary, archaeological, historical and legal sources point towards alcohol being rare and expensive. Perhaps the main difference is that in literature, alcohol seems to be idealized. Saga composers imagine the legendary times as a period in which alcohol, mostly wine, was abundant in comparison with the almost alcohol-less present the contemporary sagas depict. Feasting occasions also seem to have been rare, in the contemporary sources, while the further we get into the past, the more common feasts are said to be.

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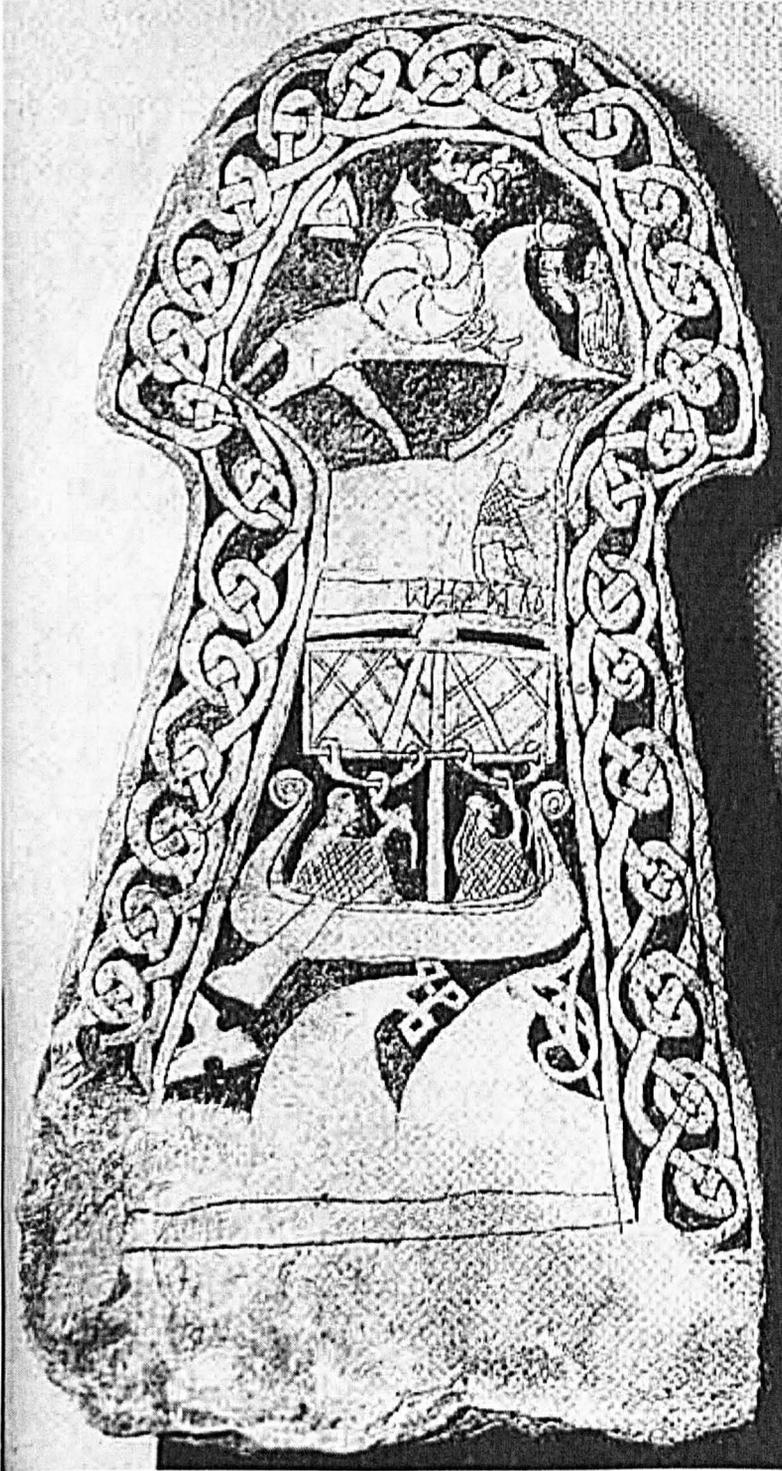


Figure 3.1. Stenkyrka stone.



Figure 3.2 Tjängvide stone



Figure 3.3 Klinte stone

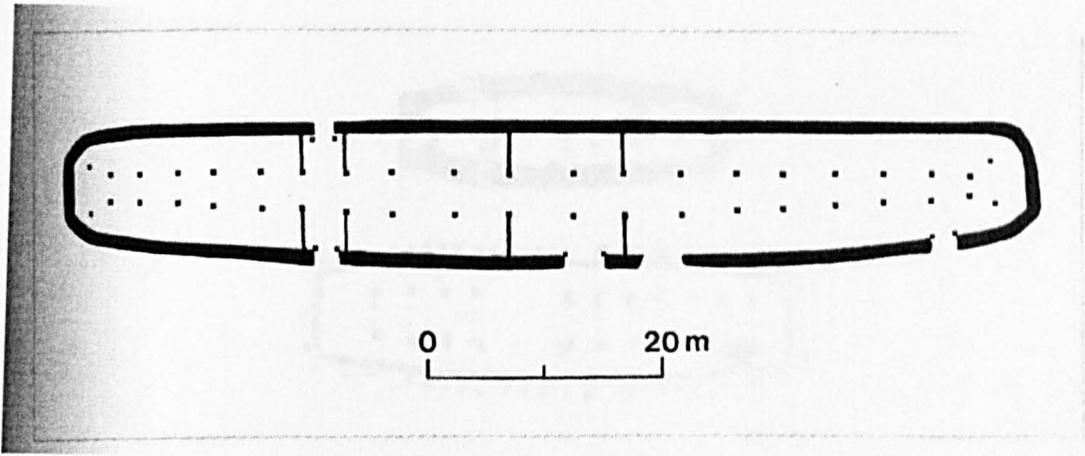
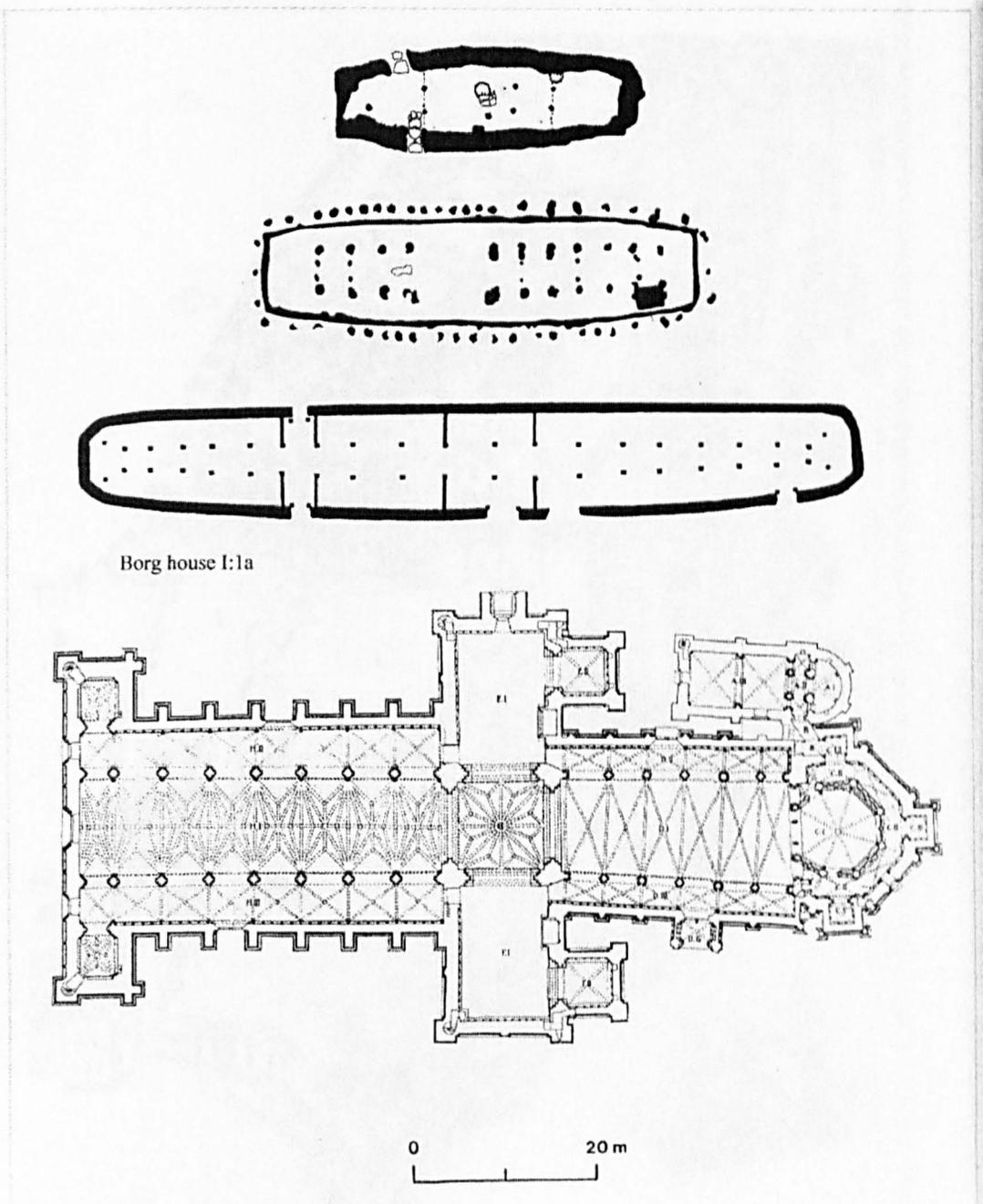


Figure 4.1 Plan of the longhouse at Borg (Herschend, p. 55)



Borg house I:1a

Figure 4.2 Image comparing the size of the longhouse at Borg with the Torondheim Cathedral (Herschend, p. 68)



Bergenhus i 1740-årene.

Figure 4.3. Eighteenth-century illustration of Håkons Hall (Roscher Nielsen, p. 42)

facilitate the mucking out. Nearby was a during the later Viking period.

The ground farmhouse a probably typ Viking Age t Iceland. Cor with the earl settlements (and Kvívik (and 77 show of including separate roc building wa in Iceland.

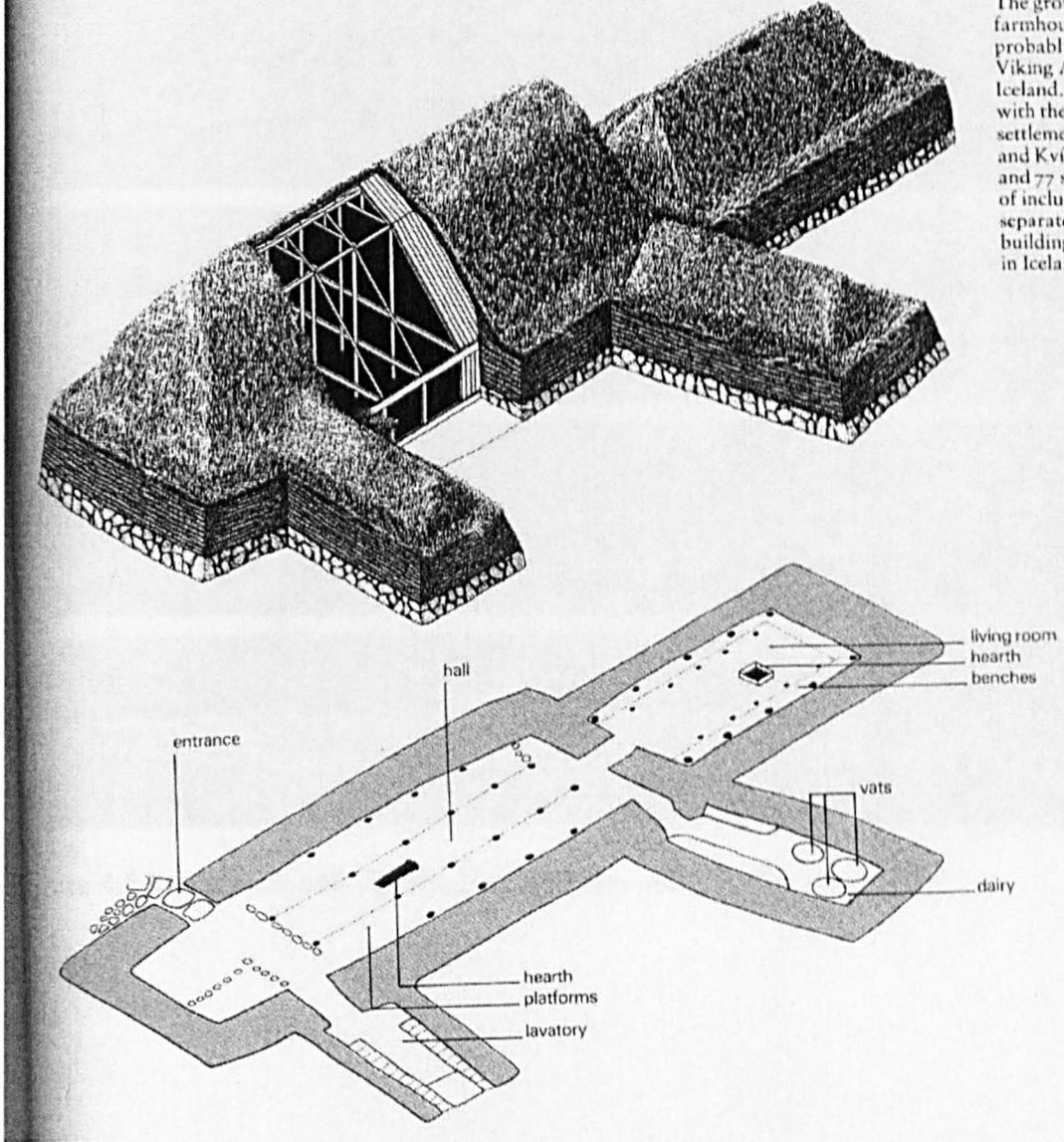


Figure 4.4 The longhouse at Stöng (Graham-Campbell, *Viking World*, p. 81).

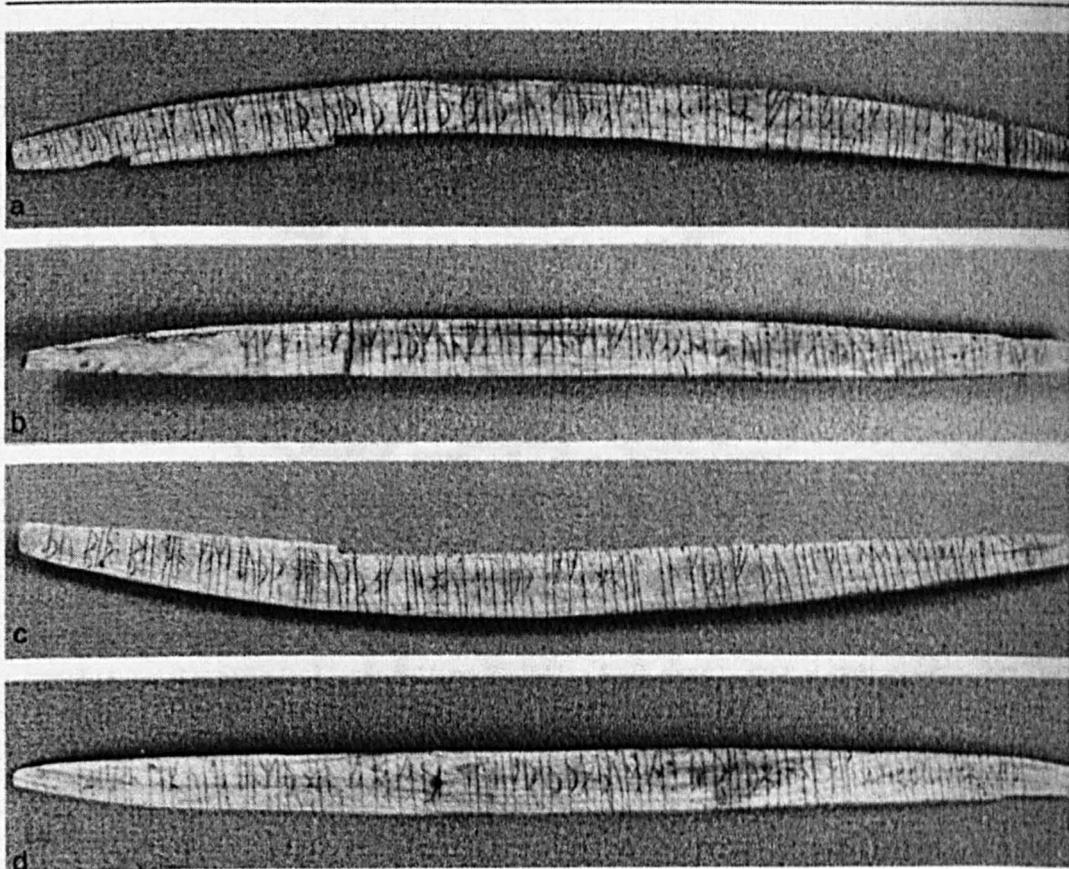


Figure 4.5 Runic stick 648- Søndre Søstergården (*Norges Inskrifter*, p. 98)

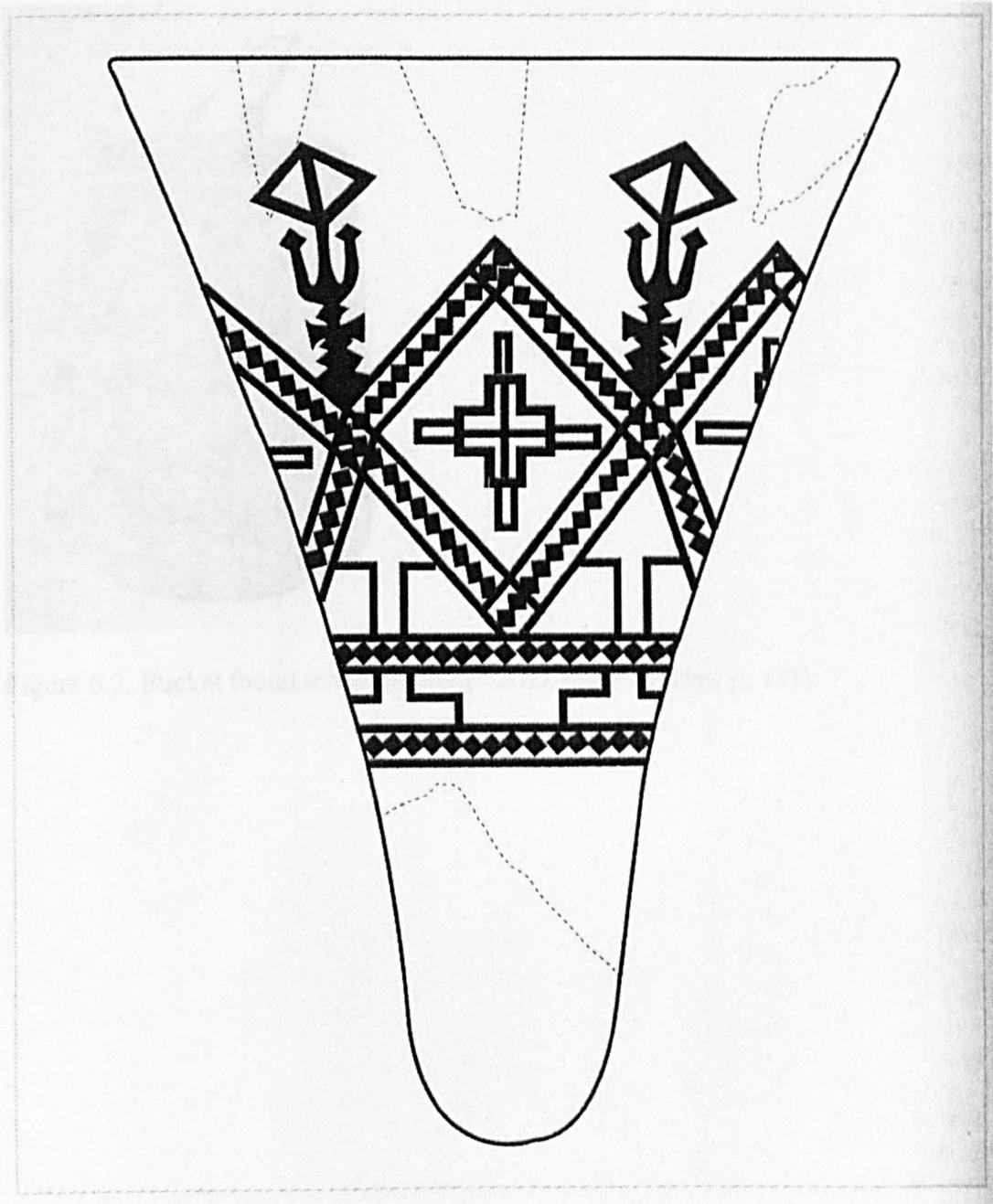


Figure 6.1 Reconstruction of the Borg funnel-beaker. (Holand, p. 218)

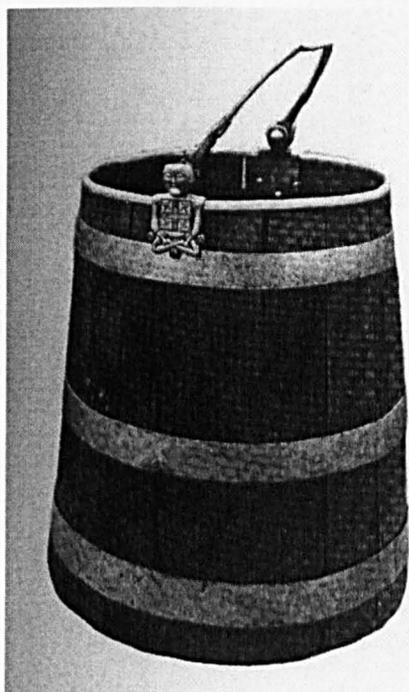


Figure 6.2. Bucket found in the Oseberg burial. (Marstrander, p. 131)