

Early Medieval Norse Food & Feasting

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The Heimskringla, or the Chronicle of the Kings of Norway, in translation, covering from about 850AD until 1177AD, and originally written in Old Norse c.1225AD by Snorri Sturluson (b.1179AD-d.1241AD), is a marvellous treasure-trove of information about Viking and early medieval Norse food and feasting, from the 9th to the 12th or perhaps 13th Centuries.

While scholars and historians apparently continue to debate the accuracy of Sturluson's work, the Heimskringla is considered an important original source for information on the Viking Age, a period which Sturluson covers almost in its entirety, and although the Heimskringla is not by any means a cookbook or food encyclopaedia but a collection of old stories mainly concerning the loves and wars of the Danish chiefs of Norway and their families, there is no particular reason to doubt its accuracy as an extant period history of Viking feasting culture.

Feasting and drinking are mentioned many times in the Heimskringla, frequently simultaneously. On the other hand, cooking and sources of food are only mentioned a few times, and are apparently beneath the importance of the main subject matter of the chronicle.

Norse Feasting Customs

Whilst omitting somewhat the tension between Christian and Pagan feasting arrangements, in chapter 15 of Hakon the Good's Saga (c.950AD) we are told how feasting festivals may be decreed by the King:

◆◆[King Hakon] made a law that the festival of Yule should begin at the same time as Christian people held it, and that every man, under penalty, should brew a meal of malt into ale, and therewith keep the Yule holy as long as it lasted. Before him, the beginning of Yule, or the slaughter night, was the night of mid-winter [December 14], and Yule was kept for three days thereafter◆◆

In chapters 16 of the same saga (c.950AD) we are told that much drinking is involved:

◆To [the *Frosta-thing*] festival all the men brought ale with them; and all kinds of cattle◆were slaughtered◆the flesh was boiled into savoury meat for those present. The fire was in the middle of the floor◆and over it hung the kettles, and the full goblets were handed across the fire; and he who made the feast, and was a chief, blessed the full goblets, and all the meat◆ And first Odin's goblet was emptied for victory and power to his king; thereafter, Njord's and Freyja's goblets for peace and a good season. Then it was the custom of many to empty the *brage-goblet* [goblet of vow-making]; and then the guests emptied a goblet to the memory of departed friends, called the remembrance goblet.◆

It may be questioned as to whether the people here are emptying the contents of their goblets on the ground as a religious offering, instead of drinking. That the latter of these alternatives is credible is evidenced by the following from chapter 18 of the same saga (c.950AD):

◆The king accordingly sat upon his high-seat. Now when the first full goblet was filled, Earl Sigurd spoke some words over it, blessed it in Odin's name, and *drank to the king out of the horn*; and the king then took it, and made the sign of the cross over it. Then said Kar of Gryting, ◆What does the king mean by doing so? Will he not sacrifice?◆ Earl Sigurd replies, ◆The king is doing what all of you do, who trust to your power and strength. He is blessing the full goblet in the name of Thor, by making the sign of his hammer over it *before he drinks it*.◆

In chapter 30 of the Saga of Olaf Haraldson or Saint Olaf (c.1014AD) we are told how feasts may be arranged:

◆When the servants told her of King Olaf's approach, and that he might soon be expected, Asta stood up directly, and ordered the men and girls to put everything in the best order. She ordered four girls to bring out all that belonged to the decoration of the room and put it in order with hangings and benches. Two fellows brought straw for the floor, two brought forward four-cornered tables and the drinking-jugs, two bore out victuals and placed the meat on the table, two she sent away from the house to procure in the greatest haste all that was needed, and two carried in the ale; and all the other serving men and girls went outside of the house◆◆

In chapter 124 of the same saga (c.1023AD) we are told that rooms and tables may be given ceremonial purposes at a feast:

◆◆[thus] Olaf had come there to a feast, and had just sat down to table. Asbjorn turned then to the feasting-room, and when he came into the ante-room one [person] was going in and another [person] coming out; but nobody took notice of him. The hall-door was open, and he saw that Thorer Sel stood before the table of the high-seat.◆

And in chapter 32 of the Saga of Sigurd the Crusader and His Brothers Eystein and Olaf (c.1127AD) we are also

told that more than one course may be served:

◆◆the king ordered the [warm] flesh [meat] dishes to be removed and other food was brought in, such as it is permitted to use. When the meal-time was almost past, the king began to be cheerful, and to drink◆◆

Meat, Fish and Eggs

9th through 12th Century Norse food, as described in the Heimskringla, is principally meat and fish, grain and honey, and beer and mead.

Meat is mentioned frequently. Feasting is typically described as eating meat and drinking beer or mead. Fish are also mentioned frequently, particularly herrings, but not as often as meat. By frequency alone meat is held in the highest regard of all foodstuffs in the Heimskringla.

Cattle, cow, bull and calf are mentioned frequently, beef once. In chapter 71 of King Olaf Trygvason's Saga (c.998AD): ◆◆[whilst] they were making ready the meat a man came to them, and observed that they were cooking very poor meat for the king's table; whereupon he gave them two thick and fat pieces of beef, which they boiled with the rest of the meat◆◆

Swine are mentioned frequently, pig once, suckling pig once, and bacon once, although ham is not mentioned. In chapter 35 of the Saga of Harald Hardrade (c.1049AD): ◆◆When King Harald saw that the Danish ships went faster he ordered his men to lighten their ships, and cast overboard malt, wheat, bacon, and to let their liquor run out, which helped a little.◆◆

Sheep are mentioned a few times, ram once, but neither lamb nor mutton. In chapter 40 of Magnus Erlingsson's Saga (c.1177AD): ◆◆The king said to the Icelanders, ◆It is told me that in Iceland it is the custom that the bondes give their house-servants a sheep to slaughter; now I give you a ram to slaughter◆◆◆◆

Goat is mentioned twice. In chapter 2 of the Saga of Olaf Haraldson or Saint Olaf (c.1000AD): ◆◆Olaf went to the goats' pen, took out the he-goat that was the largest◆◆

Consumption of horse or dog is mentioned reasonably frequently, generally as a Pagan practise, and with literary overtones of evildoing or wretchedness.

Reindeer and deer are mentioned frequently, but more for their hides, sinews and bones as equipment and tools than as food. Considering the modern vestiges of traditional practices however, one cannot imagine them as anything other than a staple foodstuff.

Wolves are mentioned frequently, wild bulls twice and bears once, although almost always not as food, but as menaces. Game as a foodstuff, venison, boar, rabbit, hare and coney are not mentioned.

Herring is mentioned frequently, fish as a collective noun less frequently, dolphin once, whale once, and seal once. Herring and salt in particular are mentioned together as trade commodities; and in the same manner as reindeer, salt herring ought surely to be considered a staple. In chapter 59 of the Saga of Olaf Haraldson or Saint Olaf (c.1017AD): ◆The King prohibited all exports from Viken to Gautland of herrings and salt, which the Gautland people could ill do without.◆

Birds are mentioned more often as birds of prey, only a few times in the context of food. Goose is mentioned twice, gosling twice, duckling once, duck is not mentioned. Fowl is mentioned three times, but in all instances as a synonym for ravens or perhaps sea birds. Swan is mentioned a few times, but not in the context of food.

Indeed, eggs are mentioned as a foodstuff only once, and moreover not the eggs of chickens, but those of sea birds. In chapter 150 of the Saga of Olaf Haraldson or Saint Olaf (c.1027AD): ◆◆Asmund Grankelson had been this winter in Halogaland in his sheriffdom, and was at home with his father Grankel. There lies a rock out in the sea, on which there is both seal and bird catching, and a fishing ground, and egg-gathering; and from old times it had been an appendage to the farm which Grankel owned.◆◆

More extremely, neither chicken, hen, rooster nor capon are mentioned at all, which to the casual observer seems at odds with how popular chicken is in the extant texts from the rest of Europe at the time, and today. For instance, during the 11th Century even Duke Guillhelm IX of Aquitaine enjoyably devours ◆fat capon, not one but two◆ in one of his poems. So how is it that in over 250,000 words, the Heimskringla does not once mention chicken?

Apparently, Norway is too adverse a habitat for chickens. In ◆Archaeological Finds of 9th and 10th Century Viking Foodstuffs◆ collated by Carolyn Priest-Dorman, chicken remains are found in Viking archaeological finds at Jorvik (York) in England, Dublin in Ireland, and Hedeby in Denmark; but not at Birka in Sweden, Jarlshof in the Shetland Islands, nor Oseberg in the South of Norway. Furthermore even today, chicken cannot be said to be a traditional nor popular Norwegian dish.

Grain, Bread and Honey

Corn is frequently mentioned, although this is not of course maize. Grain is mentioned once, and wheat is mentioned once; yet barley, oats and rye are not mentioned specifically. Korn is the original Icelandic or Norwegian word translated here, and means grain generally, although in context will mean the common grain or grains in use. Archeologically, this will almost certainly be barley, oats, wheat and rye. It may also be noted that blandkorn in Norwegian commonly means barley and oats.

Meal and malt are also frequently mentioned: almost always as being turned immediately into ale! It seems reasonable to define meal as coarsely ground grain. And malt is sprouted or germinated then dried or kilned barley. Barley malt is thus the primary ingredient in making ale, even today. It therefore also seems reasonable to deduce that corn commonly means barley, meal commonly means coarsely ground barley, malt commonly means barley malt, and bread, mentioned four times in the Heimskringla, commonly means barley bread.

Cake is mentioned once, being cakes of bread. In chapter 118 of the Saga of Olaf Haraldson or Saint Olaf (c.1015AD): ◆◆every day [the King] receives four cakes of bread, besides meat. ◆ This description furthermore seems to be consistent with the bagel shaped loaves of bread found archeologically at Birka in Sweden, made primarily of barley and whole wheat. Crumbs, quite likely bread crumbs, are also mentioned once in chapter 151 of the same saga (c.1027AD).

Honey is mentioned twice; mead is mentioned rather more frequently! In chapter 40 of the Saga of Sigurd the Crusader and His Brothers Eystein and Olaf (c.1127AD), we are told honey is a travelable commodity of some worth: ◆◆The king got ready for a journey, and took with him corn, malt and honey. He went south to Stavanger, and prepared a feast there for his marriage with Cecilia. ◆ And in chapter 17 of the Saga of Magnus the Blind and of Harald Gille (c.1136AD), we are told that it is also stored and available in moderate quantities: ◆◆Sire, we two table-companions submit our dispute to your judgment, having made a wager of a basket of honey to him who guesses right. ◆

Flour and sugar are not mentioned.

Nuts, Fruit, Vegetables and Mushrooms

Vegetables and nuts are not mentioned frequently in the Heimskringla, and mushrooms and fruit are not mentioned at all, except for two references to a ◆fruitful◆ season or harvest.

Herb is mentioned generically four times, and we are told that herbs are cultivated. In chapter 7 of Halfdan the Black's Saga (prior to 866 AD): ◆Ragnhild, who was wise and intelligent, dreamt great dreams. She dreamt, for one, that she was standing out in her herb-garden◆◆ We are also told that herbs may be used to flavour mead. In chapter 84 of the Saga of Olaf Haraldson or Saint Olaf (c.1018 AD): ◆Little Fin came to him with a stoup of mead with herbs in it◆◆

But leek is the only vegetable mentioned specifically, because of its value within the scope of the chronicle, as a medicinal herb in the diagnosis and healing of battle wounds. In chapter 247 of the Saga of Olaf Haraldson or Saint Olaf (c.1030 AD): ◆In a stone pot she had stirred together leeks and other herbs, and boiled them, and gave the wounded men of it to eat, by which she discovered if the wounds had penetrated into the belly; for if the wound had gone so deep, it would smell of leek. ◆ In chapter 263 of the same saga (c.1034 AD): ◆◆ale and leeks by old wives borne, The bruised and wounded did relieve. ◆ And in chapter 55 of the Saga of Harald Hardrade (c.1050 AD), King Harald himself is said to have written in verse of the ◆healing leek-herb. ◆

Root is mentioned frequently, and even angelica root is mentioned twice; but not as a foodstuff. Vegetable, legume, pulse, tuber and plant are not mentioned. Pea, bean, carrot, celery, onion, fungi, garlic, mushroom, parsnip, toadstool nor turnip are mentioned. Not even cabbage is mentioned, which is surprising, since cabbages are the colloquially popular traditional vegetable of Norway.

Walnut is mentioned three times, and hazel (that is, the source of hazelnuts) is mentioned three times, but almond is not mentioned. Indeed, even where walnut is mentioned, in chapter 13 of the Saga of Sigurd the Crusader and His Brothers Eystein and Olaf (c.1110 AD): ◆Go and try if you can get walnuts◆and they came to a house filled with walnuts◆◆ this is taking place outside the walls of Constantinople!

The archaeological record is valuable here though, to fill in some of the missing details. At Oseberg in Norway have been found the remains of cummin, horseradish, mustard, watercress, crab apples, hazelnuts and walnuts; at Birka in Sweden, sprouted peas, hawthorn, plum and sloe plum, and hazelnuts; at Hedeby in Denmark, cherries, blackberries, elderberries, plum and sloe plum, raspberries and strawberries; at York in England, cabbage, carrots, celery, coriander, dill, fava beans, hemp, hops, parsnip, turnip, apples, blackberries, bilberries, elderberries, plum and sloe plum, raspberries, hazelnuts and walnuts; and at Dublin in Ireland, cabbage, wild carrots, wild celery, fava beans, fennel, (black) mustard, peas, poppy seed, radishes, rape, turnip, apples, cherries, blackberries, elderberries, hawthorn, sloe plum, rose hips, rowanberries, strawberries and hazelnuts.

Yet even the archaeological record is by its very nature incomplete. Furthermore, it has failed to discover leek!

Dairy Products, Fats and Liquamen

Milk is mentioned twice, and seems well regarded. For instance, in chapter 71 of King Olaf Trygvason's Saga (c.998 AD): "The guest replied, that this Ogvald was a king, and a very valiant man, and that he made great sacrifices to a cow which he had with him wherever he went, and considered it good for his health to drink her milk."

Butter is also mentioned twice. In chapter 82 of the same saga (c.999 AD) we are told: "Before they went out to the boat they threw into her some butter-kits and a bread-chest, and carried between them a great keg of ale." Presumably a butter-kit is a butter churn, or some other permanent wooden storage device for butter, similar to a chest or a keg. And in chapter 253 of the Saga of Olaf Haraldson or Saint Olaf (c.1030 AD), we are told that butter is considered valuable enough to be taxed: "King Svein introduced new laws. At Yule every man should pay the king a meal of malt from every harvest steading, and a leg of a three-year old ox, which was called a friendly gift, together with a spand of butter."

Cheese is mentioned only once, but provides an interesting detail. In chapter 32 of the Saga of Harald Hardrade (c.1049 AD): "They had made a great mockery the winter before of King Harald's coming with war-ships against Denmark; and they cut their cheese into the shape of anchors, and said such anchors might hold all the ships of the Norway king." We are thus told that their cheese was solid enough to cut to shape, and is thus likely to be closer to modern hard Northern European cheeses like edam or jarlsberg, than soft cheeses like as brie, cream cheese or curd.

Certainly, cream, curd, whey and custard are not mentioned.

Cooking oil is not mentioned in the Heimskringla, nor indeed should we expect it to be so, since cooking oil, in particular olive oil, is primarily a Southern European cooking phenomena. Fat is only mentioned twice, in passing remarks about "fat beef", or "fat smoke" congealing on a kettle; yet considering the frequency of references to meat in the Heimskringla, suet or dripping, lard and possibly goose fat must surely be considered the common larding agents of this place and era. This is in similarity to German food of the 14th Century mentioned in "Ein Boke Von Guter Spise" (c.1350 AD) and other Northern European manuscripts. Butter may alternatively be another less common, more highly prized larding agent.

As we have already noted, ale and mead are mentioned frequently. Wine is also mentioned three times, certainly imported. Cider is not mentioned, and it seems apples suffered similarly to chickens in the adverse Scandinavian climate. Certainly apples do not appear in the archaeological record at Birka or Hedeby, and only crab apples appear at Oseberg, which yield much smaller and more sour fruit.

Spices, Recipes and Menus

Spices such as pepper, cinnamon, nutmeg and ginger are not mentioned in the Heimskringla. They are mentioned in the Danish cookbook manuscripts attributed to Henrik Harpestreng, or Henricius Dacius, c.1300 AD. However these manuscripts, whilst written in Denmark, are almost certainly copied from manuscripts originally from Southern Europe, and may even be the first time Southern European spices are mentioned in Scandinavian writing.

Salt is mentioned twice, both times as a trade commodity in conjunction with herrings. In chapter 168 of the Saga of Olaf Haraldson or Saint Olaf (c.1028 AD): "When Canute's watchmen saw the ship, they talked with each other about what ship it might be, and made the guess that it must be one loaded with herrings or salt."

Traditional Norwegian cooking is apparently spiced fairly plainly, with moderate amounts of salt, and a little pepper, or possibly mustard, the latter found in the archaeological record at Oseberg and Dublin. It makes far more use of herbs than spices, particularly dill, found in the archaeological record at York, as well as parsley and thyme.

In the Heimskringla, methods of cooking are fairly simple. Cooking pots or kettles are mentioned frequently, boiling is mentioned five times, soup twice, gravy once, and roasting (using tongs) once. Casserole, fry, grill, pastry, pie, pottage, salad, sauce, spit and stew are not mentioned, and pan is only mentioned in connection with carrying hot coals.

Two items in particular shed some light on possible Norse menus for the medieval re-enactor. In chapter 18 of Hakon the Good's Saga (c.950AD) we are told that boiled meat can be served as three different dishes, the meat, the stock as a soup, and the stock (presumably cooked with meal) as a gravy: "The next day, when the people sat down to table, the bondes pressed the king strongly to eat of horse-flesh; and as he would on no account do so, they wanted him to drink of the soup; and as he would not do this, they insisted he should at least taste the gravy;".

And in chapter 33 of the Saga of Olaf Haraldson or Saint Olaf (c.1014 AD): "King Sigurd entertained them, day about, the one day with fish and milk, the other day with flesh-meat and ale." This resembles the flesh day versus fish day menu variety seen in Master Chiquart of Savoy's "Du Fait De Cuisine" (c.1420 AD) and the English Harlean MS279 (c.1420) and MS4106 (c.1450) manuscripts, as well as several other European food

manuscripts.

Conclusions

Aside from the necessary complications of translation, the Heimskringla offers us substantial proof of basic foodstuffs, diet, methods of cooking and feasting customs.

It does not, however, offer us complexities. There are no complex recipes or menus, and little information on the actual organisation of feasts and festivals. Furthermore it does not match completely with the archaeological record, such as where chicken or fruit are simply not mentioned, yet are found in some of the excavations, or where leek is mentioned, and yet is not found. And it does not mention barley, nor the details of the baking of bread, nor the cooking of porridge or gruel.

Then again, cooking was not the primary reason for it being set down on paper. The Heimskringla is heroic saga which deals with food and feasting only insofar as food and feasting coincide with stories of gods, kings, beautiful maidens and warriors dying in battle. Essentially it is another and complimentary source to archaeology, which if used wisely can inform us meaningfully about Viking and early medieval Norse culture in general, and food and feasting, at least in part, specifically. Or at least it can from Snorri Sturluson's point of view, of his surroundings, his people, his culture and his history.

Finally, I have designed the following as an example of a 9th through 12th Century Viking or early medieval Norse feast menu for re-enactors.

Barley bread, 100 g per person
 Butter and honey, 50 g per person
 Boiled barley or frumenty, 100 g per person
 Boiled pork, 200 g per person
 Boiled beef, 200 g per person
 Boiled leeks cabbages and herbs, 150 g per person
 Roast pork with honey gravy, 100 g per person
 Roast beef with mustard gravy, 100 g per person

Beer and mead, at least 1 litre per person

The estimated food cost for 100 kg to feast 100 people is AUS\$5.50 per person. Note that this price is based on serving a 50 kg side of beef, and a 50 kg side of pork, both at \$4.50 per kg, and estimating 40% as bones, scrap and wastage.

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Alistair Ramsden, or Stefano d'Urbino, 7 June 2004

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