Journal of Medieval History 37 (2011) 19–33

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Medieval History

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jmedhist

The mead-hall community

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Keywords:
Mead-hall
Feasting
Gift giving
Ritual
Anglo-Saxon England

A B S T R A C T

The paper provides background context to the Anglo-Saxon concept of the 'mead-hall', the role of conspicuous consumption in early medieval society and the use of commensality to strengthen horizontal and vertical social bonds. Taking as its primary starting point the evidence of the Old English verse tradition, supported by linguistic and archaeological evidence and contemporary comparative material, the paper draws together contemporaneous and modern insights into the nature of feasting as a social medium. The roles of the 'lord' and 'lady' as community leaders are examined, with particular regard to their position at the epicentre of radiating social relationships. Finally, the inverse importance of the mead-hall as a declining social institution and a developing literary construct is addressed.

The term 'mead-hall' is no longer current among English-speakers; it is used here as a shorthand notation for the Germanic customs and observances surrounding the consumption and distribution of food and drink in a ceremonial setting, the giving and receiving of honorifics and rewards, and the establishment of a communal identity expressed through formal relationships to a pair of individuals whom we may call the 'lord' and 'lady'. It further relates to a set of traditions concerning hospitality offered to strangers, informal entertainment and the maintenance of wider social relationships. This paper draws on evidence from across the Anglo-Saxon period, from settlement and mortuary archaeology, from didactic literature and above all from verse, for the imaginary world of the Old English (OE) poets is the world of the mead-hall itself.

There are several OE terms for the concept of the mead-hall, of which *béorsele* and *meduseld* are typical:[1] a specific *beor* and *medu* signifying 'alcoholic drink' and a generic *sele*, *salor*, *ærn*, signifying

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[1] Old English words are referenced from the on-line Bosworth and Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon dictionary*, at http://beowulf.engl.uky.edu/~kiernan/BT/Bosworth-Toller.htm, accessed 11 November 2010, and from F. Holthausen, *Altenglisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Heidelberg, 1974).

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doi:10.1016/j.jmedhist.2010.12.010

'large building'. OE words denoting the idea of a 'hall' include *heall*, *sele*, *salor*, *seld*, *reced* and *ærn*. The term *heall* simply means a 'covered place', an indoor area, from the verb *helan*, 'to cover, hide'. A *reced* is a place with a roof stretching over it, cognate with our word 'reach'. The terms *sele*, *seld* and *salor* are all derivatives from a root meaning 'sit' or 'settle'. *Ærn* and its metathetic variant *ræn* denote a resting place, where things are put away. All these words convey the idea of a public space available for communal activity, rather than an intimate space for working or sleeping.

The hall was in both a literal and a figurative sense the centre of its community.[2] The small, early Anglo-Saxon settlements of the fifth to seventh centuries so far identified — such as West Stow, Mucking and Sutton Courtenay — often show a scatter of buildings, some only 2 metres wide and 3 metres long, and probably used for functional purposes (workshops, storerooms, byres, weaving sheds, butchery sheds, dairies, smithies and foundries). Where settlements have been excavated fully there is often one building, larger and more firmly planted in the landscape than the rest. This is characterised as the 'hall', though most are devoid of any pretension — they are merely larger examples of the kind of building found elsewhere. It is likely that these buildings housed the settlement's principal family, and this family's ownership of the largest available indoor space underscored its control of access to the formal, communal rites and observances: dominance of the settlement's social life would ensue.

In the compound 'mead-hall', the element *mead* stands for all alcoholic drinks, including beer, wine, ale, cider and probably others. These drinks held a very special place in Anglo-Saxon cultural life as extraordinary substances which could have potent effects on human beings: stimulating warmth and affection, lust, anger, envy, and oratory. For these and other reasons, alcoholic drinks in pre-Christian Germanic Europe seem to have been regarded as a sacrament, both the pathway to the gods and the road to Hel.[3] The preferred terms for 'drink' in these OE compounds are *medu-* and *beor-*, with *win-* a poor third. *Medu* or 'mead' is a honey-based drink, while *beor* or beer is derived from grain. These are domestic brews which could be produced in quantity while preparing food and processing agricultural output; they need little in the way of special equipment to make and store them. The vocabulary is traditional, and the less frequent use of *win* ('wine') perhaps reflects the status of that drink as less commonly available and a little incongruous in the context of traditional Germanic agriculture. In the eleventh-century *Colloquy on the occupations*, the master asks his student what he drinks, and receives the reply *ealu gif ic hæbbe oþþe wæter gif ic næbbe ealu* ('ale if I have [some] or water if I have not ale'); the teacher then asks whether the student drinks wine and is told that *ic ne eom swa spedig þæt ic mæge bicgean me win 7 win nis drenc cilda ne dysgra ac ealdra 7 wisra* ('I am not so prosperous that I might buy myself wine, and wine is not a drink for children and fools but for the old and wise').[4] A significant omission here is *ealu* ('ale') which does not form part of these poetic compounds relating to ceremonial drinking, although it does occur in prose contexts, such as *ealuscop* ('ale-house singer'), in the *Laws of Edgar* (*preost ne beo ealuscop*, 'a priest shall not be an ale-house singer').[5] The poetic reference to *ealuscerwen* ('ale-loss'), in *Beowulf* will be examined below.

Alongside the emphasis on 'drink', there is a parallel vocabulary of food.[6] The OE term from which we derive our word 'lord' is *hlaford*, a compound of *hlaf* and *weard*, meaning 'loaf-ward': the head of the

[2] H. Hamerow, 'Migration theory and the Anglo-Saxon "identity crisis"', in: *Migrations and invasions in archaeological explanation*, ed. J. Chapman and H. Hamerow (British Archaeological Reports, International Series 664, Oxford, 1997); H. Hamerow, *Early medieval settlements. The archaeology of rural communities in north-west Europe 400–900* (Oxford, 2002).

[3] The role of mead as a numinous substance within Scandinavian mythology has been examined in detail in J.P. Schjødt *Initiation between two worlds. Structure and symbolism in Pre-Christian Scandinavian religion* (The Viking collection, Studies in northern civilisation 17, Aarhus, 2008). The use of mead in *Beowulf* as part of sacral performance is referenced in P.A. Shaw, 'The uses of Wodan. The development of his cult and of medieval literary responses to it' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Leeds, 2002). A comparative study of poetic inspiration is found in A. Faulkes *Poetical inspiration in Old Norse and Old English poetry* (Dorothea Coke Memorial Lecture in Northern Studies, London, 1997).

[4] G.N. Garmonsway, *Ælfric's Colloquy*, 2nd edn (London, 1947; repr. Exeter, 1983). All translations are the author's unless otherwise stated.

[5] Bosworth and Toller, s.v. *ealu-scop*

[6] S. Brink, *Lord and lady, bryti and deigja. Some historical and etymological aspects of family, patronage and slavery in early Scandinavia and Anglo-Saxon England* (Dorothea Coke Memorial Lecture, London, 2005); M. Jones *Feast. Why humans share food* (Oxford, 2007), especially ch. 10; and compare the use of food in commemoration of the dead in C. Lee *Feasting the dead. Food and drink in Anglo-Saxon burial rituals* (Woodbridge, 2007).