Drinking horns in Scandinavia

Drinking horns have existed in the Nordic countries for more than 2,000 years. So they have in other countries or regions without the same imprint on national self-concept as in the Denmark, Norway and Sweden. Why is that the case?

In modern concepts of the North wild and heavy drinking Vikings play a major role, but drinking horns had other abilities than being able to contain large amounts of liquids. They were by nature ingenious and elaborated objects, precious to its owner. Consequently ceremonial functions were within reach. Secondly by their sheer size they have always appealed to fantasy. Occasionally a length of 86 cm can be reached among the surviving drinking horns. But most importantly, several surviving drinking horns existed at the crucial time, when the idea of Nordic identity entered and conquered the political scene in the beginning of the 19th century Scandinavia.

The Napoleon Wars brought the two Scandinavian states Sweden-Finland and Denmark-Norway to a fall, separated as they were into four national states – Finland left to the domination of Russia and Norway half independent but with the first democratic constitution in Scandinavia. A climate of failure and distrust to the future prevailed among the elite of the losing powers Denmark and Sweden. Somehow it gave room for the notion that only united the North would again be able to reconquer a position in European state affairs. The idea is usually called Scandinavism.

Successfully new Scandinavist thinkers (among others the Danish writer and pastor N. S. F. Grundtvig (1783-1872) and the Danish poet B.S. Ingemann (1789-1862)) introduced drinking horns as a Nordic accessory. In doing so they drew heavily on Danish renaissance writings on drinking horns, especially the serious works of Ole Worm (1580-1650, the first to write about the Golden horns from Gallehus, 2 Cent. A.D.), and to a minor degree, fantastic tales in which drinking horns were associated with magic powers.

In the later part of the 19th century and early part of the 20th century important narratives from the medieval period were translated and edited with a purpose of reaching as many as possible of the population. One of the means to do so was to illustrate the old writings abundantly. Examining these illustrations one finds a different attitude to drinking horns expressed in Norwegian and Danish books. In Norse, Norwegian literature drinking horns are found abundantly, whereas they only occur in Pre Christian time in Danish Works.

Simultaneously, historical studies at the university liberated themselves from the didactic objects of national romanticism, thus giving room for new insights in the medieval history of the drinking horn. In 1907 a complete edition of Danish Drinking horns appeared (Olrik), surprisingly showing that the main part of the surviving drinking horns all were late medieval and absolutely none from the the period of c. 1000-c.1200. In recent years it has been argued that drinking horns played an important role in lay Christian rituals among guilds and fraternities (Bisgaard). Thus drinking horns seem longer to have stayed popular in medieval times in Scandinavia than in other European regions. The ritual use of drinking horns in Christian ceremonials was never part of their 19th century Nordic revival.
Séminaire “Représentations modernes et contemporaines des Nords médiévaux”
2e journée : Université du Littoral Côte d'Opale, 27 mars 2015

Selected Works

Ole Worm, *Danicorum Monumentorum*, København 1643