

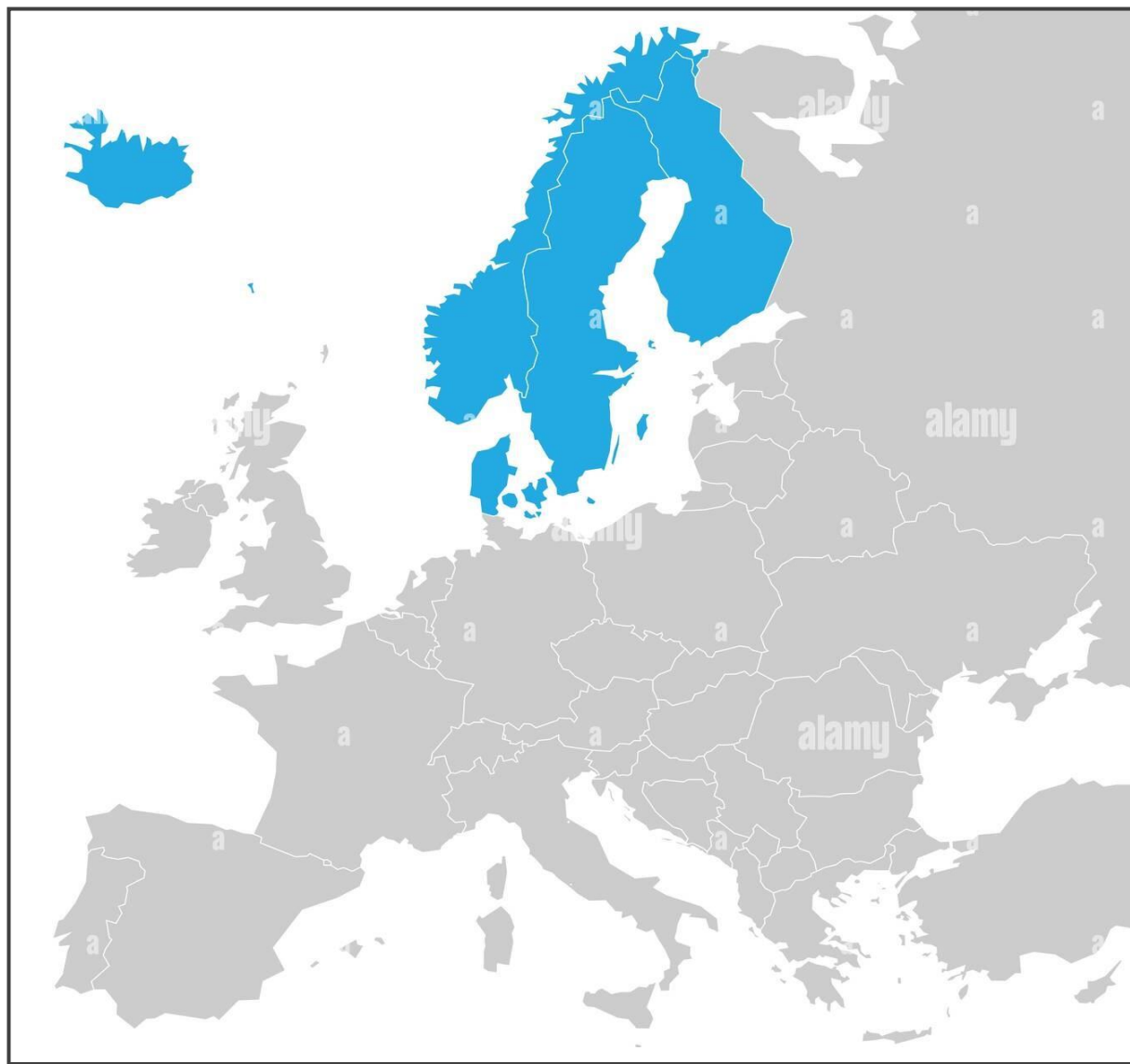
A Meal Fit For The Gods: Competitive Feasting During the Viking Age.

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Introduction

The act of feasting has long played an important role in societies around the world, serving as an important factor in the development and maintenance of social relationships. While many cultures see feasting as a key part of their society, the feasts found within Norse culture stood at the center of their way of life. This study explores ethnohistoric, archaeological, and experiential sources to gain entry into the ways feasting in Norse culture reflected and reinforced aspects of their identity from feeding the masses, to forming social bonds, to the connection with the supernatural, to reinforcing political relationships. In doing so, this work showcases the intersection of food with politics, economics, and spirituality. Bringing forth how aspects of the feast in Viking culture manifested in other aspects of daily life.

Figure 1. Map of Europe with Scandinavia highlighted in blue, detailing where Norse and Nordic culture was seated.



Hypothesis

The commonly held image of a feast in Norse culture is that of hordes of men and women drinking horns of mead over platters of salted meat and vegetables under the hearth-lit thatch roof of a longhouse, seated in the cold and gray backdrop of Scandinavia in Northern Europe. This image is one that seems almost ingrained into how the Norse people are thought of today (Anderson, 2019).

This study seeks to answer why that is, that something seemingly mundane in the modern world can shape the way we think of an ancient culture. I postulate that feasting's importance surpassed simply feeding the community, going above and beyond to build social dynamics and strengthen the bonds between people, building a foundation for the hierarchical relation between the individuals keeping and serving the food and those being served.

Methods

In order to find evidence to support my previous statements, research of the archaeological record and a literary review was conducted. This research, at first, focused on gaining as much information as possible on feasting in Norse culture. Biting into the questions of what food was available to them, when were feasts held, who held them, and what significance did they hold if any?

Following this review, further entry into this topic was found through lived experience. This experience of modern feasting culture serving as a source of some fundamental understanding of ancient feasting habits.



Figure 2. Remains of a Viking Longhouse in Stöng, Iceland (Ragnarsdottir, 2015).

Findings

In reviewing surrounding literature on feasting in Norse culture, interesting observations were made;

What They Ate

Observation - For the common person in Norse culture, fish, preserved meats like beef, pork, and mutton, dairy products, vegetables like pulses, cabbages, turnips, and leeks, and cereals like barley would have made up the bulk of their daily diet. For the wealthier individuals, wheat, beer and game meat were considered as prestigious choices, not regularly available to the common person (Serra, 2013).

During a feast, food was a little different. Fresh meat and milk would be served along with beer and mead made with imported honey. Bread was also served but seemingly only on certain occasions (Serra, 2013).

Interpretation - At the heart of any meal is food, and Norse feasts seemed to offer high quality food that doesn't seem to be consumed regularly. This can be seen in the treatment of fresh meat over preserved and dried meat and fresh versus soured milk, each being prepared differently for these festive occasions. The serving of mead is also peculiar as it is made with fermented honey which would have been imported, suggesting that this was a drink served by those wealthy enough to do so (Serra, 2013).

Who Hosted?

Observation - Those who stood as the leaders of their village or community such as Chiefs, Jarls, and Kings were the individuals responsible for hosting these feasts. These feasts would be held on special occasions like holidays and social gatherings. For the hosts, they would be responsible for preparing and serving the food along with tending to the needs of their subjects. It was at these times when the host could grant favor and glory to their subjects (Andersen, 2019). The feasts would also be held at the longhouses which served as the host's residence (Serra, 2013). Hosting also served as a way to display influence over rival Chiefs and Jarls. This competitive feasting was another big motive for Chiefs to host lavish feasts (Zori, 2013).

Interpretation - It's evident that these events also served as a way for the hosts to reinforce the social hierarchy present in Norse Culture, demonstrating the type of wealth they had to allow them to serve their whole community and import goods like honey. It also demonstrates the perceived generosity of such a host, providing them with food and lodging (Serra, 2013). The notion of competitive feasting also hints at the role it has in the politics of Norse culture.

Higher Significance

Observation - Feasting was also seen as having some religious importance. The event of eating luxurious food and mead with an overlooking Chief showering his praise onto his subjects was seen as being almost ritualistic, steeped in analog to the Norse conception of a paradisiacal afterlife, Valhalla. At which, the warriors who have died an honorable death in battle feast with the gods. Feasts would have also been held at sacrificial offerings along with marriages and even funerals Serra, 2013). Funerals of course saw other feasting practices along with the usual ones. The death of a wealthy individual might have called for the subsequent sacrifice of one of their servants who drank until intoxicated and buried with their former lord (Zori, 2018). Bread was also buried with the individual and was served almost exclusively at the funerary feast (Serra, 2013).

Interpretation - The role feasting played was very spiritual for all those involved and evident that its role in the Norse expression of worship was a key part of it. Its importance is mirrored in that of their mythology, a lavish feast hall serving as their form of paradise. The specification of drinking mead in Valhalla also serves to further reinforce aspects of hierarchy, framing it as the 'drink of the gods' (Serra, 2013).

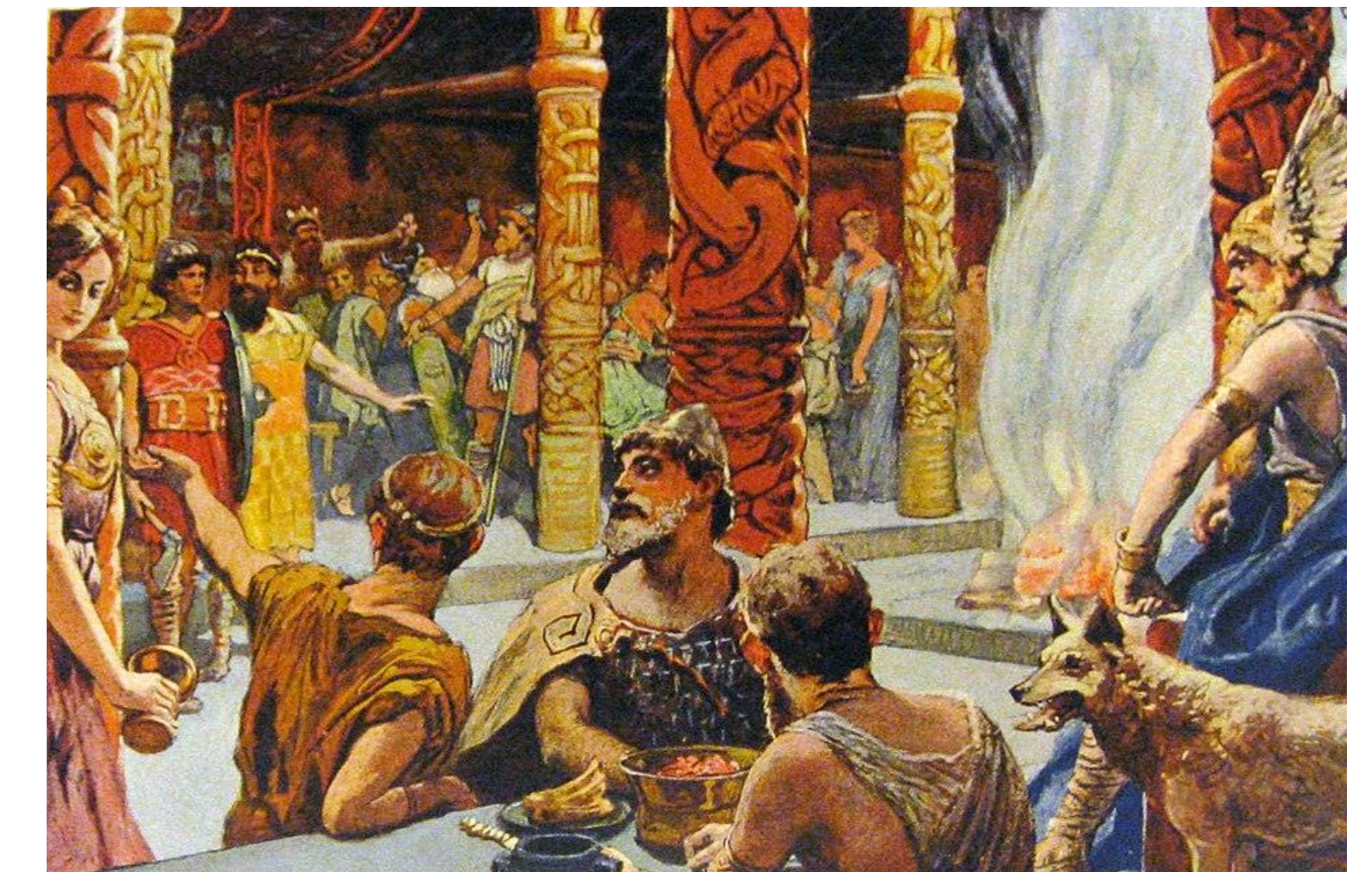


Figure 3. Portrayal of Valhalla, depicting attendants feasting merrily (Doepler, 1905).

Discussion

It is evident that not only was feasting a way for people to be fed, but an aspect of Viking culture which played a key role in the daily lives of Norse people. Being heavily integrated in the economic, political, social, and religious aspects of Norse life. With its proliferation continuing well after the Christianization of Scandinavia (Serra, 2013). It served a foundational role in building communities and set the floor for deep spiritual connection.

Its importance also shows how deeply ingrained the hierarchical structure is in Norse society. Not only is it the host's role to feed their subjects, but it's their social obligation to provide these feasts, pressured by their rivals to throw as lavish a feast as possible. Their own glory and renown increased by the number and renown of their attendants (Andersen, 2019).

Today we feast with connections to a special event or holiday, strengthening bonds with those we feast with. Hosting and serving is done with a more personal attitude, striving for a connection with those being served as opposed to ensuring a social dynamic. These feasts are often done in private, away from potential rivals and peering eyes, granting moments dedicated to the ones around us. Events like these are also done typically separated from the spiritual, thought of as more "mundane". In Norse feasting, this separation wouldn't have occurred, the nature of the feast being a form of worship, mimicking that of their afterlife (Serra, 2013).

Conclusion

Many feasting cultures and traditions exist around the world, but the one found within Norse culture has shaped the way that culture is perceived today. The interconnection between food, community, politics, and religion serves as a fundamental aspect of the feast, extending beyond simply cooking and serving the masses. It forms the bedrock of spiritual connectedness and grants us a peak at what they held to be important within their lives.

Sources & Acknowledgements

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