



Vivian Etting, *The Story of the Drinking Horn: Drinking Culture in Scandinavia during the Middle Ages* (Publications of the National Museum: Studies in Archaeology & History 21), National Museum of Denmark: Copenhagen 2013. 158 pp.

Medieval drinking horns belong to the oldest parts of Nordic museum collections; many derive from royal treasuries. Before Vivian Etting's *The Story of the Drinking Horn*, however, the only lengthier account of their history was Jørgen Olrik's *Drikkehorn og sølvtøj fra middelalder og renaissance* from 1909. In her work, Etting focuses on the medieval drinking horns in the National Museum of Denmark, but traces their history in western culture from antiquity to modern times. The study is a gratifying addition to the study of old antiquarian collections and medieval material culture, but it unfortunately suffers from two rather surprising shortcomings.

Etting begins her historical narrative with ancient Greece, where horns were used as part of the celebrations of the god Dionysus. In Roman culture, this connection between drinking horns and the chthonic cult waned, but the popularity of the object as part of the implements of drinking continued. As Roman drinking vessels, which carried connotations of wealth, were exported outside the empire, horns of glass reached even the northernmost corners of Europe. Drinking horns are also known from the Celtic context, and they gained new importance among the Germanic tribes including those in the Iron and Viking Age Scandinavia. In the North, however, the object was given a particular role in local mythology and religious rites.

In Viking Age iconography, Valkyries or divine female warriors with the special task of selecting the men who were to die in battle were depicted holding drinking horns: they welcomed the deceased with them in Valhalla. This visual cue was associated with the women's special duties in the

ceremonies of welcome. The horn belonged to the upper-class lifestyle, but despite the repeated references to the object in the written sagas, only a few actual drinking horns from the Viking Age are known.

The use of horns seems to cease during the twelfth century with the establishment of Christianity, perhaps as a consequence of the pagan meanings that the artefacts carried. In the eyes of the church, they were signs of condemnable luxury. Around the end of the thirteenth century, however, drinking horns lost these questionable undertones, and they became popular at noble households as well as among the clergy. Most of the ancient drinking horns that survive in Northern Europe date to this period in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

The late medieval horns tend to share a common form. An organic horn is decorated with gilded mounts adorned with inscriptions, coats of arms and other ornaments. The most typical inscription consists of the names of the three Magi, Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar. The horn, in fact, became routinely depicted among the gifts presented to the Christ Child, and its Viking Age connection with women disappeared altogether. Particularly guilds and religious communities adopted drinking horns for toasting and as a symbol of brotherhood.

During the fifteenth century drinking horns ceased to be visually depicted as proper vessels for drinking and changed into reliquaries not intended for the table. In fact, many of the actual objects have survived in cathedral treasuries because they were donated as reliquaries. At courts, the horns were no longer drinking vessels either, but magnificent gifts to be viewed and appreciated. In the sixteenth century, the popularity of drinking horns decreased, and they became curious and items exchanged between the members of the aristocracy. In Scandinavia, the drinking horn gradually transformed into a symbol of ancient Nordic culture, and with the advent of a Scandinavian movement in the early nineteenth century, numerous clubs and societies reintroduced the use of drinking horns at their meetings and banquets.

The book's last section, covering approximately one third of the work, is a catalogue of 28 items from the Danish National Museum's collection. Each object is presented with photographs and written descriptions. The catalogue reveals one of the book's two weaknesses. It appears that no natural scientists were consulted regarding the objects. An osteologist or biologist could probably determine the animal species of every horn with more exactitude and certainty, while analyses of the metal compositions of mounts might have provided insights about the production phase. Similarly some of the horns could have been radiocarbon dated with the help of accelerator mass spectrometry. The comparison of the scientific dates with

the stylistic dating of the decorated metal parts might have uncovered exciting peculiarities.

The second shortcoming of Etting's work is related to the term 'Scandinavia' appearing in the title of the book. She occasionally uses 'Nordic' as an equivalent term. The latter term, however, includes Finland, but Etting does not mention the country even once, although she discusses many other regions of Northern Europe, including Russia. Failing to remember one of the Nordic countries is striking as the Finnish museum collections hold quite interesting examples of drinking horns. Several fragments of metal mounts and tips of horns as well as sherds of horns of glass have been found in Iron Age graves in Finland,¹ but the oldest object of glass known in the country is the famous third-century drinking horn of glass. It was made in the Rhine region and placed in a burial cairn in Soukainen, Laitila.²

One medieval drinking horn survives in Finland as well. It belongs to the collections of the Turku Museum Centre, and is on display at Turku Castle. The tip of the horn ends in an acorn-shaped knob, and the mount of gilt copper round the rim is engraved with the inscription *drik af oc lat ga mik help maria iacpar melchi[or balthasar]* which translates as 'Drink of me and let me go, help Mary Caspar Melchior Balthazar'. The piece is thus a typical fifteenth-century drinking horn.³

In addition to the prehistoric and medieval examples, two drinking horns kept in the churches of Hämeenkyrö and Viljakkala are dated to the modern period. Their metal parts were made in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but the organic part of the Viljakkala horn was recently radiocarbon-dated, suggesting that it was harvested at some point during the seventeenth or eighteenth century.⁴ Hence, when Etting points out that the tradition of producing and using drinking horns continued in Iceland during the early modern period, Finland might be another case of the longevity of medieval practices. Perhaps the two countries were such marginal regions in the North that the old traditions persisted longer in them.

Etting discusses the nineteenth- and twentieth-century revival of drinking horns as singular, conspicuous banqueting implements. In Finland, one can point out also another, more widely distributed case of modern

¹ Ella Kivikoski, *Die Eisenzeit Finnlands*, Finnische Altertumsgesellschaft: Helsinki 1973, Figs. 74, 75.

² Ella Kivikoski, 'Skandinavisches in der römischen Eisenzeit Finnlands', *Acta archaeologica* 25 (1954), 151–170.

³ Visa Immonen, *Golden Moments: Artefacts of Precious Metals as Products of Luxury Consumption in Finland c. 1200–1600: I Text* (Archaeologia Medii Aevi Finlandiae 16), Society for Medieval Archaeology in Finland: Turku 2009, 207–212.

⁴ Anu Salmela, 'Viljakkalan juomasarvi: C-14 ajoitus historiallisen esineistön tutkimuksessa', *Pirkanmaan alta* 8 (2007), 72–76.

revival. In 1984, designer Valto Kokko created a beer horn called 'Harald' for the American Express Company. The small vessel of fixed blown glass is shaped as a miniature version of an ancient drinking horn, and it stands on a foot of brass. Although the company did not take it into production, the Iittala glass factory did. In Iittala's catalogues, the horn was photographed next to drawings of a Viking ship. The beer glass was a success, and it was produced in the 1980s and 1990s. Kokko even designed a smaller schnapps glass and a women's neck pendant based on the same model.⁵ Although some consider the beer horn rather tacky, it has become a collector's item in the twenty-first-century antiques market.

Despite its defects, Ettig's detailed work on one antiquarian group of objects is rewarding, and the accompanying catalogue will be highly valuable for future research. It is delightful to see that old museum collections still have a lot to offer for modern scholarship.

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⁵ Hannele Viilomaa, 'Valto Kokko – Talous- ja taidelasimuotoilijana Iittalan lasitehtaalla', in Heikki Matiskainen ed., *Valto Kokko: Muotoilija* (Lasitutkimuksia – Glass Research 16), Suomen lasimuseo: Riihimäki 2006, 70–91, here 77.