

Estonian, Finnish...and Orcadian

There are few feelings better than suddenly finding a drinking vessel in one's hand. Is it really necessary to wonder how the vessel arrived there? Not really, but to drink beer is to be a part of a very long-standing ritual. It is to participate in history rather than simply reading about the past. This is not dry and dusty scholarship; it is lip-smackingly wet and sensuous. In the pursuit of such studies the other day, I chanced upon a new mystery:

We know that the Mesopotamians made beer, and that the art spread, possibly through Armenia and Georgia, to Central Europe. Because there are linguistic links between the Hungarians, Estonians and Finns, we know that tribes from Central Europe spread to the far North of the continent. The Estonians and Finns accord an almost sacred status to their traditional drinking vessel, which is made of wood (usually juniper), shaped like a half-barrel or pitcher, and held with two upright handles. This is traditionally used to serve farm-brewed beers made with a proportion of rye and spiced with juniper. These brews are especially associated with midsummer and with the sauna.

The Central European tribes came to the Northwest of Europe later than the Scandinavian peoples (the Swedes, Norwegians and Danes) and the Icelanders. The Estonian-Finnish culture and the Scandinavian-Icelandic are thus separate. In Scandinavia, the characteristic wooden drinking vessel is known in some of the more remote parts of Sweden and Norway, but is not accorded the same importance. Those countries, too, have farmhouse home-brewing, though they do not usually use rye. Their beers are especially associated with weddings, the consumption of the new season's lambs, and funerals.

Norway once ruled the Shetland and Orkney groups of islands, which are now parts of Scotland. On the islands, Scandinavian forenames like Thorfin and Sigurd are still common.

I was the other day handed a drinking vessel in exactly the Estonian-Finnish style, but I was on the main island of the Orkney group. How did this style of vessel get to the Orkneys? That is the mystery.

I was told that the vessel was called a cog, and that it enjoyed a position at the heart of Orkney's folk culture. There seemed to be no consensus about the wood used, but pine was suggested.

The word cog was spelled for me. It had been pronounced more like keg. I wondered whether "cog" and "keg" had an etymological relationship to the Scottish word quaich. This also indicates a two-handled vessel, but much smaller, and saucer-like. Its handles are horizontal. A quaich is used for the ceremonial serving of whisky. The Scottish whisky industry has a ceremonial organization called the Keepers of the Quaich.

What, I asked, is served in a cog? I was told that the traditional drink was a heated punch of home-brewed strong ale, whisky, sometimes rum, brown sugar and herbs, and that each family had its own recipe. The term cog embraces both the vessel and its contents. Both are used for

ceremonies, but especially weddings. "It is still unthinkable today to have a wedding without a cog," a young woman told me. She also suggested that the hot punch was originally created to welcome house guests or travelers in the days before the car. Orkney is a famously windy place, and can be cold and dark in winter.

I was shown the cog at a farm, dating from the 1700s and still using equipment from the 1800s. The farm is maintained as a museum. For some years the museum custodian malted grain and made beer for its guests. Although I have visited Orkney several times, I missed that interlude. After an e-coli outbreak elsewhere in Scotland, and unconnected with beer, the health authorities decided that the farm was not a sanitary place in which to brew. They could not be persuaded that brewing began on farms, and that no pathogens can survive in beer.

The farm had been malting a grain that is pronounced "bare" but spelled bere. That word look familiar? The theory of a "beer-like" grain giving us the word "barley" comes into focus here. Bere is a precursor of modern barley. It looks much the same, but has four rows of corns (as opposed to two or six in malting barleys) and is very spiny and sharp.

At the farm museum, the custodian steeped his bere by putting sacksful in a stream. I have seen this method in Norway, too. The grain was then germinated on the floor of a farm building. At the end of the building, I saw a kiln, shaped like a large beehive or an igloo, eight or nine feet high. Inside was a hearth, over which was a platform of wire mesh.

When I expressed surprise at such a sophisticated kiln, I was told that every farm had one, until at least World War II. {"Everything changed after that"). The kilns were used for malting or simply to dry grain prior to its storage. Again, this was a parallel with farmhouse breweries in Scandinavia. I asked whether the fuel had been peat, and realized this was a redundant question. Orkney is so windy that it has few trees, and therefore scarcely any firewood. Before steamships, and even afterwards, it would have been very expensive to bring coal from the nearest mines, in the south of the Scottish mainland.

I was shown a barrel that had been used as a mashing vessel, and told that oat straw had been employed as a filter bed. The Norwegians use juniper twigs for the same purpose. My host at the farm, Harriet Craigie, spoke of homebrew being flavored with honey and brown sugar. She regarded Orkney Heather Ale as another drink altogether, and had not heard of herbs being used. A peat-cutter I met on the moors later mentioned sorrel as a typical flavoring.

Like the Scandinavians, the people of Orkney (known as Orcadians) harvested yeast from one batch to use in the next. It was kept cool by being stored in a well. What was the origin of the first yeasts? Ms Craigie guessed that they might have been derived from moulds on potatoes. (I remember seeing orange-skins being put to the same purpose by a maker of pulque in Mexico).

When I asked why bakers' yeast was not used, I was surprised to learn that it was virtually unknown in the Orkneys until the war. Flat breads had been baked on open fires, and boiled items like dumplings had also been a staple. A good example is the cake-like cloutie dumpling

that is still widely served in the Scottish islands. The Welsh have something similar called boiled cake.

In the Orkneys, bere bannocks, are a hybrid between a pancake and a crumbly, dough-like, flat bread. They are widely available, and often served with cheese. I sampled one, and found "dark", rye-like, flavors.

Bere is still grown in the Orkneys, and turned into flour in a water-driven mill. The mill also does some malting. The grain is, again, steeped in sacks - in the mill dam. It is germinated on the floor of the mill, which has its own kiln. Miller Rae Phillips, the third generation of his family to hold the position, told me that until the post-war period "99 per cent" of families in the Orkneys brewed. Because the weather did not suit the cultivation of barley, most of the brewing was from bere. Some brewers, unhappy that he fired the kiln with grain-husks, would bring their own peat.

Rae gave me a sample of his own bere. It was brewed at home from malted bere, with three pounds of sugar to six gallons. He estimated the original gravity at 1060. The brew was hopped with four ounces of Goldings (which, on reflection, Rae thought was too much). Although no dark malt was used, the beer had a full, apricot-like, color. It was syrupy but also drily nutty, grainy, almost dusty, with a medicinal bitterness and a warming, alcoholic, finish.

I found it a substantial ale, though I could not leave the Orkneys without a pint of the chocolately Dark Island from the local micro-brewery. Nor could I go without a single-malt or two: the silky, salty Scapa and the big, smoky, Highland Park. Somehow all three found their way into my hand.

Published Online: SEPT 6, 2001

Published in Print: SEPT 1, 2000

In: All About Beer