A Taste of Sicily – Cotton honey mead

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Introduction

This section of our journey is a stop to Sicily to make and drink some mead.

Mead as a drink is ancient [1]. While any culture with honey (probably all of them) made a fermented honey drink, it is in Northern Europe that mead becomes a very important drink.

We know mead was a high status drink. It is the drink of heroes for the Germanic people. The Nordic sagas and Anglo-Saxon poems all mention mead as a warrior's drink. But it is also the font of wisdom, the drink of skalds. In the *Edda*, there is the story about how mead was made and came to the gods.

After the war between the Aesir and the Vanir, they made a man out of a great jar and he was the wisest and best (i.e. good) man they could possibly make. He was a great traveller as well. On his travels, he encountered two mean-spirited dwarves who decided to kill him because he was so good and wise. They killed him and mixed his blood with honey into a drink. The dwarves then run afoul of a giant and give the mead to the giant to get out of a punishment. Odin then decides to find the missing skald and tricks the mead out of the giant and brings mead to the gods in Heaven.

Two quotes from the story are quite interesting:

> People sometimes think poets rather useless sort of men; but that was not the opinion of the gods, for when they made the first poet they made the very best man they could think of.
>
> So Odin brought the mead to heaven, where it remains to this day, and only those whom the gods love are permitted to drink of it.

(See the appendix for the full story.)[2]

Mead was extremely important to the early Anglo-Saxon warrior culture. The meadhall is where the king held court. Every major town would have had such a building. In the meadhall, the King would make pronouncements, reward service, give gifts, and other functions of ruling. The King was the ring-giver and the ring-breaker.

Several Old English words contain the root word for mead. Some interesting ones are: *medowerig* – weary from drinking mead – hung over; *medudream* – mead-joy; *medugal* – drunk with mead; *meduhall* – meadhall; *meoduburg* – mead town, happy town; and *meodoræden* – mead-drinking or assembly. Also, interestingly, the root *med* means reward and a *medgilda* is a hireling or mercenary. Perhaps the words arose from different sources but it is interesting that heroes were to be paid with mead [3].

Mead is also a sacred drink. In the meadhalls, warriors and companions would swear oaths, or *beots*, to achieve a task. Tacitus [4] notes that it was common Germanic custom to debate all important issues with strong drink but to avoid decisions until sober. The reasoning was similar to the Bacchanalian phrase, *In Vino Veritas*, in wine there is truth. It was thought that under the influence of alcohol, a person was less able to lie or hide their true feelings about something.

These *beots* were sealed with a draught of mead and are known in later days as mead-pledges or mead-oaths. In later times, the same thing would occur with ale and be known as an ale-pledge. The word *beot* would change into boast over time.

Perhaps the most famous mead-oath is the one still repeated today by some:

> "I swear before this company that I shall fight to the death for my King. If my King or my Lord shall die, I shall take his place and fight as he would have fought. If any man here sees me taken with weak heart and run away, he shall remind me of this pledge made here before my kin."

This probably was a traditional oath but it is recorded as the oath sworn by the Huscarls of King Harold before the Battle of Hastings. King Harold Day is now an annual event in Waltham Abbey, Essex with reenactments, falconry, and Morris dancing.

Harold and much of the English nobility around 1066 would have been Anglo-Norse in heritage due to Sven and Cnut's reigns. Harold and his huscarls were most certainly Anglo-Norse and many of those nobles that fled with Earl Siward would have been as well. The oath shows that mead was still in use, at least occasionally.

However, as we move through the Anglo-Saxon period, mead becomes less common. This has to do with its status as a warrior's drink, the Christianization of England, and the increasing rarity of honey. As forests are cleared for villages and lumber, access to wild honey decreases. Abbeys and Monasteries did practice beekeeping. We have recipes for mead all throughout this period. But mead's high point is in the early period (400 to 700). The Church discourages mead as England moves away from paganism. After that, it is a much more rare drink [5].

Our travelers then move through the Straits into the Mediterranean Sea. Some reports say they go to Sardinia and others Sicily. We know the Varangian Guard fight against the Sicilian Normans and that there were some English among the Guard. And although I cannot find a reference, I recall that the Varangian Guard was paid in mead (among gold of course). In spite of the wars, there was certainly trade between Sicily and Constantinople and the rest of the empire.

I am not attempting to recreate any given mead, just use a specify honey that might have been present. Cotton was an important crop to Muslim Sicily. Just before the Normans conquer Sicily, Muslim ruled

the island. Some of their land was devoted to cotton and like many plants, bees can and do pollinate these fields. I like to make meads that highlight the flavor of the honey itself. You have before you a mead made from cotton honey.

Process

Sterlize everything. Heat 5 pounds of honey with 2 gallons of water until the honey dissolves. Siphon into a 3 gallon carboy. Add proofed cote de blanc yeast (this is a dry white wine yeast). I like it because it gives a nice high alcohol content with a clean finish. The taste of the native honey comes through. Ferment for 3 to 4 weeks. Rack for 3 to 4 weeks to clarify. Bottle and serve. This mead has aged in bottles for ~16 months.

I also needed to back sweeten the mead. My yeasts were very active. To back sweeten, I added one cup of the cotton honey to one gallon of the mead after fermentation was done and the mead sat for 1 month.

Materials

I purchased my honey from The Bee Folks.

Cotton (*Gossypium herbaceum*) – Again, the Arabs brought cotton to Sicily [6]. In fact, cotton was well known in the Eastern part of the Roman Empire. Persians had it, Indians had it, and Egyptians had it. The Muslims introduced the spinning wheel and the raised horizontal treadle loom, the bow, reel and cotton gin to these regions. Cotton became a common commodity in the Islamic Caliphate and it was the material of the common man [7]. It would take several centuries for cotton cloth to displace linen and wool in Northern Europe, but in Southern Europe and the Near East, cotton was as common as both of these other materials.

References

[1] Iain Gately*, Drink, a Cultural History of Alcohol,*

[2] *Norse Stories Retold from the Eddas*, by Hamilton Wright Mabie

[3] Peter S. Baker, *Introduction to Old English 2E*

[4] Tacitus, *Germania* ch.22

[5] Iain Gately*, Drink, a Cultural History of Alcohol,* p. 60

[6] Andrew M. Watson, *Agricultural Innovation in the Early Islamic World: The Diffusion of Crops and Farming Techniques 700-1100* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 31-41.

[7] Maureen Fennell Mazzaoui, *The Italian Cotton Industry in the Later Middle Ages 1100-1600* (Cambridge, 1981), pp. 7-27, 73-76.

Appendix

Full Story of How Odin Brought Mead to the Asgard.

[37] It happened almost at the beginning that the gods and the Vans went to war with each other, and long and fierce was the struggle between them. When peace was made at last, Njord, Frey, and Freyja found homes for themselves in Asgard, and henceforth they were all as one family.

While the council at which peace was made was being held, a great jar stood in the open space between the two parties, and when the meeting was over the gods were so glad to be rid of the troublesome war that they resolved to create something that should always remind them of the council. So they took the great jar and out of it they moulded the form of a man, and called him Kvaser.

Kvaser was grown up when he was born, and a wonderful man he was [38] too. In all the world there was nobody so wise as he; ask him any question, and he could answer it. He knew how the gods lived, how the world was made, and what sort of places heaven and hell were. Kvaser was good, too, as all really wise men are. He was a great traveller, always going from place to place, and always welcome, because wherever he went he made men wiser and better. People sometimes think poets rather useless sort of men; but that was not the opinion of the gods, for when they made the first poet they made the very best man they could think of.

But poets cannot keep out of trouble any easier than other men, and sometimes not half so well. One night as Kvaser was travelling along through one of those deep [39] valleys that run down to the sea in that country, he came to the house of two dwarfs with very queer names, Galar and Fjalar. They were not only little in size, but small and mean in nature, and like all other people of little nature, they were very envious and cruel, and they hated Kvaser because he was so much nobler than they. Galar had a dark, ugly face, which looked still uglier when he saw Kvaser coming towards the house.

"Fjalar! Fjalar!" he called out, "here comes the wise man who always talks in rhymes, and thinks he knows so much more than anybody else."

And when Fjalar saw the poet walking across the fields, a black shadow came over his face like a thunder-cloud. "Galar," he whis- [40] pered, looking around to see that nobody could hear, "we've got him alone; let's kill him, and see how much good his wisdom will do him."

Meanwhile Kvaser was slowly approaching the house, and the sea, as it dashed against the rocks, was making a song in his mind. If you had heard him sing it, you would have heard the voices of the waves as they toss their white caps and chase each other foaming and roaring and tumbling on the beach. When Kvaser came up to the dwarfs they pretended to be very glad to see him, and told him he was the one person above all others they had wanted to see, because they had a question they had been waiting a long time to ask him. Kvaser was so noble himself that he never thought evil of any one, and when they asked him to [41] go with them into a very dark and lonely part of the valley, so that nobody could hear their talk, he had no suspicion that they meant any harm; but no sooner had they come to the place than they struck him down from behind. Having killed him, they caught his blood in two jars and a kettle, and mixed it with honey, and so the wonderful mead as made. It took not only sweetness but life to make true poetry.

Not long after this Galar and Fjalar killed a giant named Gilling, and were punished for it too; for the giant's son, Suttung, when he discovered how his father had been put to death, took the dwarfs out to sea and put them on a little rocky island where they would certainly be drowned when the tide came in, and rowed off to leave them; but the rascals begged [42] so hard to be taken off, he finally promised to let them live if they would give him the mead. Then Suttung took the mead home and put it in his cellar, and told his daughter Gunlad to watch it day and night, for he knew what a precious drink it was. So the mead passed out of the dwarfs' hands into the keeping of a giant.

Now the gods were very fond of Kvaser, and when a long time had passed without any word from him, they asked Galar and Fjalar if they knew anything about him, and the dwarfs said he had been choked by his own wisdom; but Odin knew that this was a false story. He kept his own counsel, and said nothing about what he was going to do, but one day the gods missed him, and knew he had gone on one of his long journeys. [43] As he walked along nobody took him for a god; he looked like a very handsome labourer, and in fact that is what he really was. He had pretty much the whole world in his charge, and he had to work very hard to keep it in any kind of order. Words could hardly describe the beautiful country in which Odin took his way,—its deep, quiet green valleys, with the sparkling cold streams rushing through them; its steep mountains, crowned with fir and pine; its great crags standing out into the sea; and its fjords breaking the coast into numberless bays. Odin enjoyed it all, for the gods love beauty, but he was thinking all the time how he should get the mead out of the giant's cellar. He knew perfectly well that Suttung would never give it up willingly, and that he must get it either by force or by [44] stratagem. Suttung was very strong, and the cellar was cut out of the solid rock; and the more Odin thought about it the harder it seemed to him. If he had been a man he would have given up, but that was not his way; besides, he had loved Kvaser, and the mead was his blood, and he meant to bring it to heaven.

Now Suttung had a brother named Bauge, who was a farmer, and one afternoon, as his nine thralls were mowing in the fields, they saw a stranger coming towards them. It was a very uncommon thing to see a stranger in that out-of-the-way place, and the men all stopped work to watch him. He was a farm labourer like themselves, but he was very large in stature, and had a very noble face and manner.

"A fine meadow of grass," he said [45] in a deep musical voice as he joined them, "but you find it hard work; your scythes are dull."

They certainly did look tired and overworked.

"Hand me your scythes and I will whet them for you," continued the stranger. The thralls were very glad to have anybody do that for them, so they gave him their scythes without saying a word. In a moment the valley rang with the quick strokes of the stone on the hard metal, and the sparks flew in showers around them. The men had never seen such a whetting of scythes before, and their astonishment grew greater still when they found that the grass seemed to fall like magic before them. The mowing, which had been so hard, was now the easiest thing in the world.

[46] "Sell us the whetstone," they shouted, crowding around the stranger.

"Well," said he very coolly, "I will sell it, but I must have a good price for it."

Then each demanded it for himself, and while they were quarrelling as to which should have it, the stranger threw it high into the air, and bade them fight for it, which they did so fiercely that each slew his fellow with his scythe, and the stranger was left alone in the field. He threw the whetstone away, walked off, and as the sun was going down, came to the giant's house and asked if he might stay all night. Bauge was willing, as people were in those days, to give supper and a bed to the stranger, and asked him in.

After supper they talked together, and Bauge told the stranger that his [47] nine thralls had been fighting in the field and had killed each other, and that he was in great trouble because he did not know where to get men to do his work.

"I'll do it," said the stranger.

"Yes," said Bauge, "but you are only one.

"That is true," he answered, "but try me and I'll do the work of all nine."

Bauge looked as if he didn't believe it, but it was one good man gained, at least, and that was something.

"What shall I pay you?" continued Bauge, determined to finish the bargain before the man had time to change his mind. The stranger thought a few moments as if he were uncertain what pay he wanted.

"I'll do the work," he said slowly, [48] at last, "if you will give me a drink of the mead in your brother's cellar." Bauge was very much surprised; he could not understand how the man knew anything about the mead. He was very sure, however, that Suttung would not give him a drop of it, and he thought it was a good chance to get his work done for nothing. "Well," said he, "I can't promise you that, for Suttung takes precious good care of the mead, but I will do what I can to help you get it."

So the bargain was made, and the next morning the stranger was at work; and all summer, early and late, he was in the fields doing the work of nine men. Bauge often wondered what kind of a man his new farm-hand was; but so long as the work was done he cared for nothing more, and he asked no ques- [49] tions. The stranger once said his name was Bolverk, and that was all he ever said about himself. The months went by, winter came, the work was all done, and Bolverk demanded his pay.

"We'll go and ask my brother for it," said Bauge; so they both went to Suttung. Bauge told his brother the bargain he had made with his workman, and asked for a little of the mead.

"No" said Suttung very crossly, looking suspiciously at Bolverk; "it's no bargain of mine, and not a drop shall you have."

Bolverk seemed not at all surprised at his ill fortune, and Bauge thought that he had gotten his work done for nothing; but after they had gone a little way together and were hidden from the house by the trees, [50] Bolverk drew out an auger from under his clothing.

"Bauge," said he, "you promised to help me get that mead. I am going into Suttung's cellar for it."

Bauge smiled at the idea of cutting through a thick rock and getting into the cellar with that auger, but when it was handed to him he took it without saying a word and began to bore. It was an astonishing auger, for no sooner had he pressed it against the rock than it began to fly around with wonderful rapidity, the chips of stone fairly making a cloud about him. Once he stopped, for he was afraid he really would get into the cellar, and told Bolverk he had bored through, but Bolverk knew that couldn't be true, because the chips still flew out, so he told Bauge to go on. In a little time the au- [51] ger slipped through. Bauge looked around, but there was no Bolverk, and while he stared in every direction a large worm crept up the rock and into the hole. When Bauge caught sight of it he thrust the auger hastily into the hole, but Bolverk's voice answered back from the cellar, "Too late, Bauge; you needn't bore any longer."

Then Bauge suspected that a man who had done the work of nine men summer, and suddenly changed himself into a worm, must be somebody more than common. Bolverk was actually in Suttung's house, but how was he to get out again with the mead?

Gunlad, the young lady who had been charged by her father to watch the precious drink day and night, was sitting quietly beside it, when she [52] was suddenly surprised, and not a little frightened, by the apparition of a young and beautiful man standing before her. What the handsome young man said to her nobody knows, but he probably told her he was very much exhausted, and hinted that she was very lovely; that he had never seen any one he admired so much before. At any rate, he persuaded her to let him drink three draughts of the mead, only three. They were certainly the most astonishing draughts anybody ever heard of, for with the first he emptied one jar, with the second he emptied the other jar, and with the third he finished the kettle.

And now another wonderful change took place. Bolverk had entered as a worm, but no sooner had he drunk the mead than in an instant he be- [53] came an eagle, and before Gunlad knew what had happened, with splendid wings outspread he was rising upward in broad, easy flight. Through the still air, faster and faster, higher and higher, in wide circles that swept far round the summits of the mountains, in swift majestic flight he rose until the earth had vanished out of sight, and his mighty pinions beat against the gates of Asgard.