

Weddings in the Viking Age

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Weddings in saga times were often marriages of state. They were arranged to cement alliances or to reward men for acts of service to a great lord. Unlike the European women of the later middle ages, viking women had some say in whether or not they would be married to a particular suitor though they were often coerced. In the romance of "Egil and Asmund" we find that two daughters were asked their opinion before being betrothed to the two men who saved their lives:

The king asked the foster-brothers whether they 'd prefer their reward in gold and silver, but both gave the same reply, that they'd rather have his daughters as long as the girls were **willing** to marry them. The girls knew that the foster-brothers had saved their lives and said they wouldn't want any other men for husbands if they could marry these. So the outcome was that Egil married Bekkhild and Asmund married Brynhild.²⁰

Weddings themselves were massive and lengthy spectacles. They were celebrated with an elaborate feast often lasting a month or more. These feasts provided the guests with huge portions of food. They encouraged drunkenness at a level unparalleled in modern times. They were also filled with music and story telling. Sagas frequently mention that "the leaders and all the most important people were invited to the... wedding."²¹ thus it can be seen that they were political as well as social occasions. The guests were seated on benches and the bride was seated separately from the groom. The story of "Egil and Asmund" tells us that this allowed the older, more experienced ladies to give "them advice about how they should conduct themselves."²²

Gifts were also presented at a wedding, but the custom was slightly different than the one we know today. It is apparent that the father of the bride gave the happy couple gifts, much in the tradition of the dowry. Sagas mentions such gifts from the bride's father as gold, silver, chess sets, fine shirts, rings, and even magic flying carpets (Yes, flying carpets in viking sagas! And you thought that The Arabian Nights had a corner on that market!) Husbands often gave their wives gifts upon their wedding nights. This "bed gift" was presumably given in exchange for the maidenhead that she would surrender to him. Furthermore, guests at weddings were also lavishly showered with gifts. At the wedding of Halfdan Eysteinnsson "all of the guests were presented with gifts appropriate to their rank, and this made Halfdan so popular that everybody wanted to serve him."²³ There is however, no mention of the guests giving presents to the couple getting married.

²⁰Herman Pálsson and Paul Edwards, *Seven Viking Romances* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985) 255.

²¹Pálsson and Edwards 251.

²²Pálsson and Edwards 252.

²³Pálsson and Edwards 193.

The story of "Bosi and Herraud" devotes an entire chapter to a discussion of one particularly exciting wedding feast and it is thus excerpted here:

A Wedding Feast

Early in the morning Bosi went back to Herraud and told him what he'd learnt during the night. They got ready to leave, and Bosi gave the young woman a gold ring. They followed her instructions about which way they should go, until they came in sight of the farm where Sigurd was staying. Then they saw him making for the royal palace with a servant. The foster-brothers stepped forward into their path. Bosi drove his spear through Sigurd, and Herraud strangled the servant. Afterwards, Bosi flayed the bodies.

Then they went back to the ship, told Smid what they had done, and between them settled their plans. Smid put Sigurd's clothes and the skin of his face on Bosi, and wore the other mask and the servant's outfit himself.

Then they told Herraud what he had to do and walked up to the palace. They came up to the door where King Godmund was waiting, and he thought this was Sigurd, so he welcomed him and led him into the palace. 'Sigurd' took charge of the royal coffers, and of the ale supplies and wine cellars, too. It was he who decided what ale should be served first, and told the cup-bearers how generously they were to serve the drinks. He said it was most important that the guests should get as drunk as possible on the first night of the feast, since that way they would stay drunk much longer.

All the important guests were shown to their seats, and the bride was escorted into the palace and led to her bench with a large company of elegant young women.

King Godmund sat on the high-seat. Beside him sat the bridegroom with Hrærek in attendance on him. It isn't said how the other noblemen were placed, but this much is known, that 'Sigurd' played the harp before the bride and her maidens. When the toasts were being served, 'Sigurd' played so well, everyone remarked that he had no equal, but he said this was only the beginning. The king told him not to spare his efforts. When the memorial cup consecrated to Thor was carried into the hall, 'Sigurd' changed the tune. Then everything loose began to move—knives, plates and anything else which no one was holding on to—and lots of people jumped up from their seats and danced on the floor. This went on for quite some time.

Next came the toast dedicated to all the gods. 'Sigurd' changed the tune again, and this time he played so loud, the music rang through the entire palace. All the people inside jumped to their feet, except the king and the bridal couple. All the guests were shuffling about and so was everything else inside the hall. This too went on for quite some time.

The king asked whether 'Sigurd' knew any more tunes. He answered that there were still a few less important ones and advised everybody to take a rest for a while. The guests sat down and carried on with their drinking. Then he played the tunes of the 'Ogress', the 'Dreamer' and the 'Warrior', and after it was time for Odin's toast to be drunk. Then 'Sigurd' opened the harp. It was heavily inlaid with gold, and so big that a man could stand upright inside it. From inside he took a pair of white gloves, gold-embroidered, and played the 'Coif Thrower'. Then all the coifs were blown off the ladies' heads and danced above the crossbeams in the hall. All the men and women jumped to their feet, and not a thing remained in its place.

When Odin's toast had been drunk, there was only one more left, the toast dedicated to Freyja. Then 'Sigurd' started plucking the one string that lies across the other strings, and told the king to get ready for the tune called 'Powerful'. The king was so startled at this tune that he jumped to his feet and the bride and the bridegroom too, and nobody danced more vigorously

than they did. This went on for quite some time. Now Smid took the bride by the hand, led her a lively dance, and when he got the chance, picked up the table service and bundled it into the bridal sheets.

Now we come back to Herraud, who told his men to stove in all the ships along the coast, making them unseaworthy. He sent some others up to the town to collect the gold and jewels that Smid had put ready for them to carry down to the sea. By now it was growing very dark. Some of the men were on the roof of the palace, watching what was happening inside and hauling up through the skylight what had been thrown into the sheets. Others carried this down to the ship, which had been pointed out to sea...²⁴

Bibliography

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²⁴Pálsson and Edwards 219-221.