OF POTS AND PORRIDGE: FOOD, COOKING, AND SERVING IN OLD NORSE SOURCES

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**Abstract:** This article explores the ways in which medieval Icelanders imagined the food and culinary practices of their Viking-Age ancestors. Through a critical synthesis of vocabulary and narrative in sagas, poetry and law texts, it becomes possible to move beyond isolated references to food and culinary practice, and to begin to consider attitudes to particular foods and technologies. The survey identifies some apparent constants in culinary memory – boiling, the use of kettles – as well as contrasting cooking and eating practices in elite and non-elite circles, and in foreign and domestic settings. The textual evidence thus usefully augments and nuances what can be gleaned from the material remains of culinary practice in Viking and medieval Iceland.

**Keywords:** food, cooking,sagas, eddic poetry, skaldic poetry*, þættir*, cooking pots

Mikit eitt

skala manni gefa,

opt kaupir sér í litlu lof;

með hálfum hleif

ok með hǫllu keri

fekk ek mér félaga.

(*Hávamál* in Jónas Kristjánsson and Vesteinn Ólason 2014, 332)

One should not only give much to a man, often with little one buys oneself praise; with half a loaf and with an inclined goblet I gained a partner.[[1]](#footnote-1)

This quotation, taken from stanza 52 of the eddic poem *Hávamál*, outlines the importance of food and drink in the society of the Norse-speaking populations of medieval Scandinavia and Iceland. In this stanza, it is not important how much food and drink one offers a person; what is important is that one offers it. This emphasis on the role of generosity and hospitality in forging social bonds and alliances is echoed throughout the medieval prose texts known as the sagas of Icelanders (*Íslendingasögur*) and the tales of Icelanders (*Íslendingaþáttur*). For example, *matsínkr* (stingy-of-food) is used as an insult in *Bandamanna* *saga* (*Bandamanna* *saga* in Guðni Jónsson 1936a, 354).[[2]](#footnote-2) The social memory of the good host and the sharer of food is a strong feature of Norse literary texts: a memory that was perhaps focussed on and mediated by the cultural object of the cooking pot. Food can also act as a marker of cultural difference; eating habits of the Icelanders seem to have been the subject of self-deprecating jokes abroad, as a man in *Halldórs þáttr Snorrasonar hinn fyrri* is referred to as a *mǫrlandi* (suet-lander) in Norway (*Halldórs þáttr Snorrasonar hinn fyrri* in Faulkes 1980, 6). Perhaps Norwegian hospitality was seen as the pinnacle of good practice, with the suet-eating Icelanders a little backward in their culinary habits.

Indeed, preferences and traditions regarding the preparation and consumption of food may be important contributors to the construction of identity, whether in terms of status, ethnicity, or its myriad other manifestations (e.g. [IJzereef 1989; Crabtree 1990; Ervynck 1997; Carlin and Rosenthal 1998; Ashby 2002; Sykes 2005)](https://paperpile.com/c/p3RHZM/06RR%2BF2Pf%2B59Au%2BlCGR%2BYACv). Food, as a medium that is consumed in diverse public and private contexts [(compare Crader 1990; Lee 2007; Lucas 2009; Zori et al. 2013; Mainland and Batey 2019)](https://paperpile.com/c/p3RHZM/rKUr%2BpJhy%2Bhqp2%2BvmJ5%2BXkiI/?prefix=compare,,,,), and which is dynamic and transformative while simultaneously capable of acting as a vehicle for the maintenance of conservative or archaic practice [(Hastorf 2016)](https://paperpile.com/c/p3RHZM/MQqc), thus has great potential to inform our understanding of identity in the Viking world (see, for example Isaksson 2010). It is thus remarkable to note the degree to which the role played by the analysis of food remains in informing our broader understanding of issues such as identity and culture-contact has been marginalised. In Viking-Age England, for instance, the issue of Norse-native relations has most effectively been studied via language and linguistics [(Townend 2002; Jesch 2015)](https://paperpile.com/c/p3RHZM/hnV9%2BO3zb), mortuary archaeology [(Hadley 2002; Richards 2003)](https://paperpile.com/c/p3RHZM/flkX%2BFy8y), architecture [(Boyd 2009)](https://paperpile.com/c/p3RHZM/Zy0k), and, most particularly, from the study of dress accessories and other items of portable material culture [(Thomas 2012; Kershaw 2013)](https://paperpile.com/c/p3RHZM/34KT%2BLXEK). The influence of food studies has been minimal (though see [Barrett, Beukens, and Nicholson 2001; Holmes 2015)](https://paperpile.com/c/p3RHZM/Fh77%2BMzeB/?prefix=see,).

Recent developments hold potential. For instance, in Sweden, organic residue analysis has unlocked the potential of ceramic vessels to inform on their culinary histories (Isaksson 2000, 2010). In the case of Viking-Age England, ongoing work is attempting to integrate similar biomolecular analyses with what is already known from faunal, archaeobotanical and (where available) documentary sources [(Ashby 2018)](https://paperpile.com/c/p3RHZM/oRTT). But how might one contextualise such archaeological evidence were data available from a more extensive corpus of textual sources? Herein, the concern is with such a body of material: Icelandic poetry, saga, and law. The aim is not to use this material to generalise our study of food remains in the Viking world, and we must take care to acknowledge the confounds emerging from the chronological distance between these texts and the Viking Age they describe. These texts of course relate a particular literary genre rather than a historical text, and as such conventions, intentions and audience may conspire to render representations of food far from the reality of everyday practice (see, for example Guerrero Rodriguez 2002). Moreover, the sagas may be seen as a literature of oral tradition, or as a repository for the retention of memories. As such their writing may have been conditioned not by passive memory, but by active and selective processes of remembering and forgetting (see, for example Hermann 2009). Accordingly, it should be acknowledged that the material provides only a general cultural context for attitudes to Viking-Age food, but this nonetheless constitutes an important step forward; our simple hope is that the study may inform future archaeological and interdisciplinary studies of Viking-Age and medieval cuisine.

In particular, these sources may give insight into culinary technology and attitudes to food not otherwise available, through their consideration of ingredients, methods of preparation, appropriate contexts for the preparation and consumption of particular foods, or associations with status or particular identity groups. Excellent interdisciplinary research has already been undertaken on food in saga literature, covering issues such as the cultural values associated with various foodstuffs (Kraus 2013), the role of alcoholic drinks (Guerrero Rodriguez 2007), and the situating of food preparation and consumption in the social space of the longhouse (Vidal 2013). The purpose of this article is rather different: we intend to focus on the technologies visualised in these textual sources: how the preparation, serving, and consumption of food and drink are depicted, and what material items of food preparation and service the sagas and poetry mention in their relating of these activities.

# A Note on Sources

While this article does not examine the complete corpus of Old Norse literature, it focuses on those sources that take a retrospective approach: that show medieval recreations of a Viking Age past in poetry and prose, or copies of law reflecting the ideals of a past society.[[3]](#footnote-3) The literary sources examined in this paper seem acutely aware of differences in eating and cooking practices between elites and non-elites, and between gods, giants, and men. The heroes of the Eddic poems roast their meat, often as part of a revenge plot or to gain knowledge, while the sagas show men huddled around iron pots boiling their meat and oats, and venturing out to coastal islands to retrieve their dried fish. Skaldic poetry seems little concerned with the food of men: unsurprisingly, given its general use in commemoration or praise of particular events or persons, and the laws of medieval Scandinavia are equally unconcerned with cooking pots or food preparation, with only the Icelandic *Grágás* including provisions on iron pots.

The wide range of textual sources analysed in this article, each with their own generic conventions and contexts and their own level of engagement with culinary matters, are nonetheless important to bring together to examine how wider ideas about food, preparation, and pots, circulated and developed in different genres of text. The sagas of Icelanders, as stories rooted largely in the farming society of medieval Iceland, provides the most culinary material for the consideration of everyday meals, while it is largely *Ólafs saga Helga* that, of all the kings’ sagas, engages most with pots and pans and food. Scenes of eating, food preparation, and other uses of pots in these sagas sources have two sides to them: they are literary episodes, and therefore fulfil functions within the constructed narrative, but the terminology used and practices depicted have been chosen within this literary framework precisely because they were considered appropriate for these contexts. While the sagas of Icelanders, legendary sagas, and kings’ sagas compiled or composed between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries in Iceland cannot provide first-hand accounts of how men and women in the Viking Age prepared and ate their food, and are not factual accounts of the Viking-Age past, they do provide depictions of how certain medieval Icelanders imagined the customs and practices of their predecessors. Their narratives engage with a fabricated past, drawing on, it has been suggested, oral stories (Sigurðsson 2004, 32) and, in the case of the Kings’ sagas, older poetic sources (Jesch 1993, 160), to present a view of the past and eating in the past that was meaningful, and plausible to medieval Icelandic audiences.

As highlighted above, this article will survey and examine examples of food preparation and eating across these sagas, as well as short verses found within these texts and longer poetic texts primarily contained within the Codex Regiusmanuscript. The article aims to work as an introductory review for archaeologists thinking about food and cooking in the Scandinavian north, and to offer a model for future literary reviews aimed at building accessible links between disciplines. The article begins by presenting an outline of the terminology found in the texts under discussion (see Table 1), before examining the limited legal material found concerning pots in the early laws of Iceland. It then considers the depiction of eating at home and cooking on the move in both the sagas of Icelanders and the kings’ sagas, before turning to descriptions of eating and cooking in the poetic corpus, specifically ending with an analysis of the stanzas of *Rígsþula* in which two contrasting scenes of meal preparation are described. In light of the evidence raised by this research, these stanzas can be placed into a wider context of medieval Icelandic thinking about food and culinary technologies of the past.

# Old Norse Terminology of Cooking and Eating

Table 1 shows the vocabulary of eating and drinking in the textual sources, both poetic and prose, which were consulted for this research. This list is not exhaustive but indicates the most common terminology. For greater clarity, this terminology is split into different sections, including cooking words, cooking pot words, serving dish words, drinking vessels, and storage containers. There are, in particular, a large number of terms for drinking and eating vessels, clearly indicating a preoccupation with difference in how people ate and drank, and also the prominence of such in poetic contexts, requiring a number of different alliterative options. Analysis of the nature and use of such terminology can reveal ways in which culinary technology was conceived by Viking-Age and medieval Icelanders, although it should be noted that the translation of these terms can sometimes be difficult to pin down, often relying on the context of the passage in which they occur.

The two most notable points to highlight are, first, that the term *ketill* (kettle, pot, cauldron) is a common name in the textual sources, and, second, that the verbs and nouns associated with cooking and places of cooking: *soðhús*, *soðning*, and *sjóða*, while often translated as ‘kitchen’, ‘a cooking, or thing to be cooked’, and ‘to cook’, respectively, are derived from an original meaning of boiling. Such a usage suggests that boiling became synonymous with the idea of cooking in Old Norse textual culture. In general, words for cooking and cooking-pots in the sagas are boiling-, meat-, and fire-related – and, likewise, words for fires are often specifically qualified with meat-related prefixes – though specified acts of ‘roasting’ over fires are rare in the sagas of Icelanders, and even the dead warriors in *Valhǫll* are described as feasting on boiled meat in the eddic tradition. The pot used for such boiling, the *ketill,* is often the only term used for a cooking pot in these texts, sometimes qualified with different prefixes to specify a specific function or feature: *steinketill* (stone-kettle), *jarnketill* (iron-kettle), *búðarketill* (booth-kettle), and *hituketill* (boiling-kettle). The term *hverr* is also used, often in eddic contexts, to indicate a boiling pot, and this word is also used in Old Norse to indicate the hot springs in Iceland (Cleasby and Vigfússon 1874, 300). There are multiple different words for dishes and cups, and these will be discussed in more detail below in their individual contexts, as there seem (unsurprisingly) to have been specific types of serving dish for different contexts. It would be instructive to investigate how well these labels might fit into archaeologically recognized forms, but their identification in the literary sources is valuable in itself.

# Legal Pots

While not a literary source *per se*, the legal texts of medieval Iceland construct a certain view of society and the consequences of deviating from the normative social construct in a similar way to the sagas of Icelanders in their re-creation of Viking-Age society. For our purposes, it is remarkable that the earliest collection of laws extant from Iceland, known as *Grágás*, is the only one of the medieval Scandinavian law texts (as far as the authors’ are aware) to include legal stipulations over an item of culinary technology.[[4]](#footnote-4) Legal traditions are important for showing how the Norse society in Iceland structured itself and what kinds of relationships were prioritised within the community (or indeed, the compiler of the text believed should be prioritised – therefore the notice on the value of a *jarnketill* indicates that this was an item that needed defining: ‘Jarnketill nýr oc oelldr *oc* vegi hálfa vett oc IiGi í viii. sciólor f*yrir* xv. avra’ (*Grágás* in Vilhjálmur Finsen 1852, 193) (An iron cauldron, new and never on the fire, weighing half a load and taking eight bucket-fulls, is worth fifteen ounce-units) (*Grágás* in Dennis, Foote, and Perkins 2000, 207). Such an item was evidently important, as this valuation is included in the same section as the valuations of domestic animals and standardized cloth, and is the only cooking item included in these valuations (it is notable that iron cauldrons are not infrequently found in high-status pagan graves from Norway [(e.g. Rygh 1885 (1999), 82](https://paperpile.com/c/p3RHZM/aO6y/?locator=82&prefix=e.g.)) and Iceland [(e.g. Kristján Eldjárn and Adolf Friðriksson 2000, 96–97, 561](https://paperpile.com/c/p3RHZM/uhRG/?locator=96-7%2C%20561&prefix=e.g.)), while iron cooking equipment recovered from domestic contexts occasionally shows evidence of repair – something rarely seen in ceramic technology [(e.g. Ottaway 1992, 604))](https://paperpile.com/c/p3RHZM/LpBn/?locator=604&prefix=e.g.). Kettles are sometimes presented as valuable objects in the sagas – at least, it may have been worth engaging in a vendetta when denied such an item. In *Þorsteinn siðu-Hallsons saga* (ch. 2), Þórhaddr has increasing numbers of his rival’s livestock slaughtered each autumn, all because the first man refused to give him a certain ‘ketill, mikill ok góðr’ (*Þorsteinn siðu-Hallsons saga* in Jón Jóhannesson 1950c, 303) (great and good kettle)to which both men had an equal right. Clearly the idea of the valuable cooking-pot persisted. Perhaps the detailed specifications for the legal *ketill* were formed in response to such arguments: if all such pots were of standard size and material, then jealousies and social unrest could not ensue over particularly fabulous specimens.

In the notice in *Grágás*, one can see that iron was the preferred material for such vessels (or that iron was the only material with legal currency) and that such vessels were to be used in trade or gifts only if newly made. The volume of the kettle is further explained: ‘Þ*at* e*r* katla máls sciola er tré e*r* sett ilögg oc tecr avðro*m* megi*n* aþrö*m* xii. þu*m*lunga meðal m*ann*e i nagls rótom (*Grágás* in Vilhjálmur Finsen 1852, 193) (A cauldron-measuring bucket is one where a stick the length of twelve thumb-widths, as measured across the nail-root of an average man, put on the bottom on one side touches the rim on the other (*Grágás* in Dennis, Foote, and Perkins 2000, 208). This suggests that such a pot was important not only because of its condition and material of manufacture but also its capacity. Such a clarification suggests at least some attempt to standardize the production of such vessels, perhaps focused on cooking-pots that were to operate in the wider community in some way (trade, exchange, etc.). Interestingly, this idea echoes something seen in late ninth-century England, as a new, more professionally manufactured, standardized repertoire of ceramic technology is introduced from continental Europe, presumably via the patronage or bondage of the Viking Great Army (e.g. Kilmurry 1980; Perry 2016). While the laws do not indicate for what this legal *jarnketill* would have been used, we might assume that here we find the boiling instrument shown in many saga descriptions of culinary practice, as shall be seen below.

# Sagas of Icelanders and Kings’ Sagas

The representation of the fantastic *ketill* in *Þorsteinn siðu-Hallsons saga* is a rare one, and most cooking-pots in the sagas of Icelanders seem to conform to an everyday object of utility, rather than an object of value. While, as Eva Kraus points out, the larger gatherings or feasts of the sagas of Icelanders rarely, if ever, include details of the preparation or eating of specific foods (focussing as they do instead on the social aspects of eating rather than the individual act), smaller family meals within the home are occasionally described in detail, including the specification of different serving and eating dishes, and descriptions of the storage and preparation of food (Kraus 2013). Furthermore, the sagas include descriptions of Icelanders cooking while travelling. Although compiled, like almost all of the sources discussed in this article, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, these sagas codify attempts to rewrite or re-imagine a Viking-Age past. The culinary activities depicted can be seen partly as medieval imaginings of how early Icelanders and Norwegians prepared and consumed their food, as well as partly a reflection of how high medieval Icelanders did so. *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings* references a storehouse full of ‘slátr, skreið, ok ostar’ (*Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings* in Björn K. Þórólfsson & Guðni Jónsson 1943, ch. 15) (fresh meat, dried fish, and cheeses), and reading the sagas of Icelanders gives the strong impression that these were the main food staples of the Icelanders. This is supported by archaeological evidence from medieval Iceland, which clearly demonstrates the economic significance of stored fish in particular [(Vésteinsson 2016; see also Krivogorskaya *et al.* 2004; Keller 2010)](https://paperpile.com/c/p3RHZM/RaQP%2BTNrY%2BKp4U/?prefix=,see%20also,). Alongside these, porridge is also often mentioned, mostly in conjunction with travelling or with residence in Norway (see the verses from *Sneglu-Halli þáttr* discussed below).

Consistent with the evidence discussed above, the predominant method of cooking in the sagas, when described, seems to be boiling something in a *ketill*. In *Heiðarvíga* *saga* (ch. 9), one finds a *hituketill* used to boil a sheep’s head: ‘Styrr sat við eldinn. Þar hafði verit hǫfð soðning um daginn, ok stóðu hitukatlar útar á gólfinu, sem soð var í (*Heiðarvíga* *saga* in Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson 1938, 232) (Styrr sat by the fire. There had been a sheep’s head boiling during the day, and a brewing kettle stood farther away on the floor, and the broth was in it). Here, the pot has been used to boil meat all day but has now been taken off the heat and placed away from the fire, still containing the broth of the meat. Thus, one sees the combination of pot, fire, and meat that is found in many of the cooking episodes in the sagas. Food preparation that does not require these three things is much less often described in these texts, and it is the storing of cheese and the storing and fetching of stockfish that are described, rather than their preparation (or the eating of them).

We see another boiling scene in *Kormáks* *saga* (ch. 4): ‘Þat var eitt sinn, er Kormákr kom í Tungu, sá hann Steingerði í soðhúsi. Narfi stóð við ketil, ok er lokit var at sjóða, vá Narfi upp mǫrbjúga ok brá fyrir nasar Kormáki’ (*Kormáks* *saga* in Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1939, 216) (One time, when Kormákr came to Tunga, he saw Steingerðr in the kitchen. Narfi stood by a cooking-pot, and when the boiling was finished, Narfi lifted up the sausages of suet and meat and brought them to the nostrils of Kormákr). This section from *Kormáks* *saga* is one of the most elaborate depictions of culinary preparation in the sagas of Icelanders, and while this scene is included in the saga to enable Narfi to make suggestive verses about Kormákr and sausages (compare Hansen 2010), that such a scene is considered appropriate to the compiler of the saga demonstrates it must have been a plausible scenario for the medieval Icelandic audience to imagine. The casual references to these cooking-pots that one finds in the sagas, often featuring in key events (sometimes in a very active role), demonstrate their presence in social activities, as well as showing how these medieval storytellers regarded the practicalities of cooking and eating in Viking-Age Iceland.

The word *trygill* is often used to indicate the thing from which food was eaten, and this is often translated as ‘trough’ or ‘trencher’ (*Heiðarvíga* *saga* in Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson 1938, 289). However, just as with *ketill*, one can find *trygill* used with different qualifying prefixes to indicate specific use. In *Eyrbyggja* *saga* (ch. 13), food is eaten from a *grautartrygill* (trencher for oats) with a spoon, suggesting that whatever a *trygill* was, it was a dish that could serve for liquid foods (*Eyrbyggja saga* in Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson 1935, 24). The term *diskr* (dish) is also used, though in a manner that suggests it was used for dry foods. *Heiðarvíga saga* takes an explicitly retrospective stance to culinary practice in its depiction of Viking-Age Iceland and emphasizes that the men of this time did not use dishes to eat their food: ‘Um morgininn býr Koll-Gríss þeim dǫgurð; en þat var siðr, at lagðr var matr á borð fyrir men, en þá váru engir diskar’ (*Heiðarvíga* *saga* in Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson 1938, 276) (In the morning, Koll-Gríss prepares the day-meal for them; but it was then the custom that food was placed on the table before men, and there were no dishes). Here the food eaten is unspecified *matr* (food), but it can be assumed that this is hard food, such as cheese, dried fish, or roasted meat, given that no plate or bowl is required. The image here may emphasize the poverty or backward nature of these men in eating their meat straight from the table; alternatively, this passage might suggest that the interpretation of the term *borð* is limited by the more common presentation of this as ‘table’. This chapter later indicates that a *borð* (board) is placed in front of each man, and an *yxinsbógr* (ox-shoulder) shared between them (*Heiðarvíga* *saga* in Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson 1938, 276). Therefore, in this saga the *borð* might be more correctly read as a type of flat platter, and the saga-author’s intentions to indicate not the lack of plate but rather the difference between terminology and practice across the two time periods, without offering a derogatory opinion of one in favour of the other. However, different sagas present different pictures, as *Fljótsdæla saga* (ch. 19) shows ribs being eaten off the bone with knives, where the meat is emphatically taken from dishes seemingly placed in the centre of the table (*Fljótsdæla saga* in Jón Jóhannesson 1950a, 280). In this episode, there are dishes, but no individual plates in front of the men from which the *skammrif* (short rib) is eaten (*Fljótsdæla saga* in Jón Jóhannesson 1950a, 280). The inconsistent use of terminology and ideas in these texts suggests that individual stories and scribes engaged with different ideas of the past and contemporary terminology in various ways. Further literary study of eating in these texts should examine the use of terminology within the contexts of the individual saga to consider whether common registers are found in groups of texts or whether this usage varies on a text-by-text basis.

While the author of *Heiðarvíga saga* uses *borð* as an individual plate, *borð* is more often used to refer to ‘a table’, and there are common descriptions of ‘setting out the board’ found across the sagas: that is, bringing out or setting up the table in some way (e.g. *Færeyinga saga*, ch. 6; *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, chs. 16, 43, 71; *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 48; *Eyrbyggja saga,* ch. 51). In some sagas, the description of the *borð* emphatically indicates a moveable feature; for example, in *Egils saga* (ch. 61) we see Arinbjörn using the phrase:‘taka upp borðin’ (*Egils saga* in Bjarni Einarsson 2003, 102) (take up [remove] the table). In some sagas, one also finds a distinct object called the *drykkjuborð* (drinking-table; for example, *Kjalnesinga saga* in Halldórsson 1959, 35 and *Færeyinga saga* in Halldórsson 2006, 46).

As shown above, the majority of the food items eaten in the sagas, when specified, are either meat or dairy products; perhaps surprisingly, fish (*fiskr*) and dried fish (*skreið*) are barely referenced as food items across the sagas, and then often only as provisions for the winter (Kraus 2013, 55). While *Ólafs saga Helga* provides a description of Sigurður sýr feeding the king and his men ‘annan hvern dag at borðhaldi fiska ok mjólk, en annan hvern slátr ok mungát (*Ólafs saga Helga* in Bjarni Adalbjarnarson 1941-51, II, 46) (every other day as board-fare fish and milk, and every other day meat and beer), it is notably in Norway that this variation occurs. In the sagas of Icelanders it is primarily the act of going fishing, or the storage of dried fish that is referenced; for example in *Hrafnkels* *saga* (ch. 5), Hrafnkell ‘hafði mikinn atdrátt af fiskinum’ (*Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða* in Jón Jóhannesson 1950b, 122) (had great household supplies of fish), and in *Eyrbyggja* *saga* (in Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson 1935, 145), *skreið* is stored in stacks in the house. The limited presence of fish as a consumable is surprising, as research has shown the processing of dried fish to have been a prevalent feature of society in Iceland from very early on (Amundsen et al.2005).

While we have limited descriptions of cooking meat in these texts, we have no descriptions of the drying of fish. We are given a sense of the place of such fish, as *skreið* is always fetched or purchased by characters from isolated headlands or islands; for example, in *Grettis saga* (ch. 42), ‘skreið mikla’ (a great amount of dried-fish) is bought from traders on a place called Nes (headland), and carried back on seven horses (*Grettis saga* in Guðni Jónsson 1936b, 139); and in *Brennu-Njáls* *saga* (ch. 9), a man ‘átti eyjar þær, er heita Bjarneyjar; þær liggja út á Breiðafirði; þaðan hafði hann skreið ok mjǫl’ (*Brennu-Njáls* *saga* in Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 30)(owned islands that were called Bear-islands. They lay out in Breiðafjörðr. From that place he had dried fish and flour). Presumably such sites were those with the wind conditions favourable for the drying process. In *Egils saga* (ch. 17), one also finds *skreiðfiskr* procured, quite practically, as provisions for a voyage. In a way, the use of *skreið*, has important implications for discussions of culinary technology in Viking-Age and medieval contexts, as a food item that would not necessarily have required any sort of plate or cutlery to eat, and indeed required no cooking.

Depictions of cooking, eating, and preparing food at home in this small selection of saga sources show a variety of scenes in which the fire and the cooking-pot are of prime importance and the cooking and preparation of foods such as *skreið*, *ostr*, and *mjǫl* are not mentioned, although they are clearly stored close to or within the house in these narratives. The implements and method of eating are often not explicit, though *trygill* seems to be the most common word used to describe the plate or dish from which food is eaten in the sagas of Icelanders, with *diskr* used to indicate larger serving plates.

## *Eating and Cooking on the Move*

While food preparation and serving scenes in the sagas’ depictions of activity at home can be considered to have been included in these narratives due to the role of the home and its spaces as vital in the playing out of the feud plots of the sagas, it is interesting to see that the compilers of the texts also paid attention to how men cooked and ate while away from home. While *skreiðfiskr* might have been the most logical food of the travelling man (as mentioned above), we do not see travellers consuming such, but rather cooking other meals.

In these stories of travelling men, two things stand out: the use of cooking-pots is explicitly highlighted, suggesting these were items medieval Icelanders considered appropriate to be carrying around, and the most common food referenced for cooking in these pots is some kind of porridge. In *Grettis* *saga,* Grettir is said to have carried a *ketill* with him into outlawry (*Grettis saga* in Guðni Jónsson 1936b, 199), but the most extensive example of men cooking abroad can be seen in *Eyrbyggja* *saga* (ch. 39):

Þorleifr kimbi hlaut búðarvǫrð ok skyldi gera graut. Arnbjǫrn var á landi ok gerði sér graut; hafði hann búðarketil þann, er Þorleifr skyldi hafa síðan. Gekk Þorleifr þá á land upp ok bað Arnbjǫrn fá sér ketilinn, en hann hafði þá enn eigi þafðan sinn graut ok hrœði þá enn í katlinum;

(*Eyrbyggja saga* in Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson 1935, 105)

Þorleifr *kimbi* had been allotted the cooking turn (lit. booth-warding) and should make porridge. Arnbjǫrn was ashore and he had made his porridge with the booth-kettle, as Þorleifr should have afterwards. Þorleifr then went ashore and bade Arnbjǫrn get him the kettle, but he had then still not thickened his porridge and so he stirred the kettle;

Here, one not only finds a specific type of cooking pot referenced (perhaps a sort of camping-kettle of the medieval north), but gets to see an example of how the compiler of the saga considered the daily routine of food preparation among groups of travelling men might have been enacted. Here, there are no women, but rather the men are shown taking turns at the cooking – a scenario that, in this case, ends with porridge-spillage and Arnbjǫrn striking Þorleifr with the *þvara* (stirring-stick(*Eyrbyggja saga* in Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson 1935, 106)).

Another example of men travelling with pots is found in *Ólafs saga Helga* (ch. 189), one of the kings’ sagas: ‘Þá mælti konungr, at hann skyldi láta upp katla alla ok í hvern ketil láta nǫkkut af slátri, ok svá var gǫrt’ (*Ólafs saga Helga* in Bjarni Adalbjarnarson 1941-51, II, 324) (Then the king said that he should bring out all the cooking-pots, and in each pot put some flesh, and so it was done). Here, one sees again that *ketill* is used for these pots that the men have carried with them on their journey, although here, instead of *grautr*, we have *slátr* (flesh) being cooked, perhaps a reflection of the elite nature of Óláfr’s company. Elsewhere in *Óláfs saga Helga* we see a healer carrying a *steinketill* (stone-kettle) with her, in which she would mix together a drink to give to wounded men, to assess the extent of their injuries:

Hon hafði þar gǫrt í steinkatli, stappat lauk ok ǫnnur grǫs ok vellt þat saman ok gaf at eta inum sárum mǫnnum ok reyndi svá, hvárt þeir hefði holsár, því at kenndi af laukinum út ór sári því, er á hol var.

(*Ólafs saga Helga* in Bjarni Adalbjarnarson 1941-51, II, 392)

She boiled crushed garlic (or leek) and other herbs together in a stone-kettle, and gave this to the wounded men to eat, and so found out which men had wounds in their digestive system, because she recognized from the smell of the garlic out of their wounds which were hollow.

Here, any wounds in the stomach or gut that are open to the surface will smell of garlic when the patient drinks the mixture. It is uncertain whether the *steinketill* acts as a sort of mortar, or a cooking pot, or both, but the *steinn* element presumably indicates that these vessels were made of steatite (a soft, talc-rich rock used in western Scandinavia in the absence of a local ceramic tradition and dispersed throughout the North Atlantic diaspora. The production, exchange, and use of such vessels are well studied by archaeologists across the North Atlantic region (Forster and Turner 2009; Schou 2015; Hansen et al. 2017; [Sindbaek 2015](https://paperpile.com/c/p3RHZM/iQ11))).

Other references to men travelling describe *matsveinar* (food-boys, cooks) and *bakstreldr* (bread-fire), suggesting that porridge was not considered the only food suitable for consumption on such journeys (*Kormáks* *saga* in Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1939, 296). Equally, porridge was not only considered a food to be eaten while on a journey, as *Kormáks* *saga* (ch. 16) shows a domestic scene between Bersi and his *þingmenn*, in which the saga author emphasizes that Bersi eats *grautr*, while his men eat ‘ost ok skyr’ (cheese and curds(*Kormáks* *saga* in Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1939, 260)). It was not only cooking-pots that the sagas considered men to have carried with them on journeys, but plates too. In *Óláfs saga Helga,* a man ‘tók ór serk sínum silfrdisk einn ok mataðisk þar af’ (*Ólafs saga Helga* in Bjarni Adalbjarnarson 1941-51, II, 259) (took from his shirt a silver-dish and ate from it). The specification that the dish is made of silver indicates this is an elite expression of culinary practice, but it also gives an understanding of *diskr* not just as an object on which food might be served (as discussed above) but also something small and portable for individual use. This depiction is found in a kings’ saga, in a narrative episode set in Norway, suggesting that *diskr* may have served different purposes or may have come to refer to different objects in Icelandic and Norwegian contexts.

Perhaps the most vital journey depicted in the saga-world is the annual journey to the *alþingi* in the summer. Like journeys abroad, it seems that the saga-authors considered this an occasion to which it was appropriate to take a *ketill*. In *Njáls* *saga* (ch. 145), one sees a man boiling meat at the Alþingi: ‘Þar var maðr úti hjá búð nǫkkurri, er Sǫlvi hét; hann sauð í katli miklum ok hafði þá upp fœrt ór katlinum, en vellan var sem ákǫfust (*Brennu-Njáls saga* in Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 407) (There was a man outside near a certain booth, who was called Sǫlvi; he boiled [food] in a large kettle and had taken the meat out of the kettle, and the boiling was at its fiercest). This is a dangerous situation for Sǫlvi, as he then gets into an exchange of insults with Hallbjǫrn *sterki*, and Hallbjǫrn kills him by throwing him headfirst into the boiling *soðketill*.

In cooking episodes involving men on the move, in which no pots or methods are mentioned – for example, in *Egils saga* (ch. 45) – one finds the more ambiguous ‘gerðu seyði’ (made a cooking-fire), which does not specifically indicate whether the slaughtered cattle in this case are to be roasted or boiled on this fire (*Egils saga* in Bjarni Einarsson 2003, 61). However, given the prominence of cooking-pots and boiling in the evidence surveyed above, it seems likely that the saga-author may assume the audience to be familiar with the method of cooking involving meat and a fire, and relying on an assumption that a *ketill* would have been part of the travelling kit of these Viking-Age men. If such a belief could be taken for granted by a saga-writer, then it might have been considered unnecessary to depict the manner of cooking explicitly.

# Poetic Contexts

Skaldic poems are often less than effusive on the subject of human food, being more interested instead in the food of eagles and wolves (dead men killed in battle). However, there are two stanzas from *Sneglu-Halla þáttr,* a short story found in the thirteenth-century *Morkinskinna* (c. 1275) and in a fifteenth-century longer version inserted into the fourteenth-century *Flateyjarbók* (Turco 2015, 195), in which food, and in particular, porridge, are given pride of place:

Haddan skall, en Halli
hlaut offylli grautar;
hornspônu kveðk hônum
hlýða betr an prýði.

(*Þjóðólfr Arnórsson, Lausavísur 7* in Whaley 2009, 172–73)

The pot-handle clattered, and Halli got more than his fill of porridge; I declare that a horn spoon suits him better than finery.

 (*Þjóðólfr Arnórsson, Lausavísur 7* in Whaley 2009, 172–73)

This stanza is included in the tale after Halli is found having left the main feasting room of the court gathering and hidden himself away to make porridge. The reference to the pot-handle is interesting and often absent from textual references (the most famous being the kettle-handle on which the steam from boiled horse-meat collects in *Hákonar saga góða,* ch. 17), while the stereotype of Icelanders’ preference for porridge and basic implements over fine meals is emphasized. Roasted meat, for example, would not be eaten with a horn spoon, and one is reminded of the existence of conspicuous items of culinary equipment that are associated with elite practice, such as the cooking spits, meat forks, and cauldrons found in pagan Scandinavian graves [(e.g. Rygh 1885 [1999], 23, no. 428; Ashby and Leonard 2018, 18)](https://paperpile.com/c/p3RHZM/aO6y%2BsTtC/?locator=23%2C%20no.%20428,18&prefix=e.g.,).

This stanza is one of two surprising examples of skaldic verse in the corpus that refer to oats and porridge-making, although there is sadly no evidence for a tenth- or eleventh-century date for these verses, unlike some other skaldic verse preserved in later texts (Jesch 1993, 160). The second example is also from the same tale and reinforces the stereotype of the porridge-loving Icelander in this depiction of a relationship between an Icelandic poet and a Norwegian king:

‘Hvert stillir þú, Halli?’
‘Hleypk framm at skyrkaupi.’
‘Graut munt gørva láta?’
‘Gǫrr matr es þat — smjǫrvan.’

(*Haraldr harðráði Sigurðarson, Lausavísur 9* in Gade 2009, 50–51)

‘Where are you headed, Halli?’ ‘I’m hurrying ahead to buy curds.’ ‘You’ll probably want to make porridge?’ ‘Perfect food is that — buttered.’

(*Haraldr harðráði Sigurðarson, Lausavísur 9* in Gade 2009, 50–51)

Here there are four separate lines of dialogue: King Haraldr asks Halli where he is going, Halli indicates he is hurrying to buy *skyr* (dairy product, curds), Haraldr suggests he is going to make porridge – drawing on Halli’s previous encounter with the cooking pot and the spoon, and Halli confirms that porridge is *gǫrr matr*, here translated as ‘perfect food’. However, Halli here is either defending the Icelandic preference for such food (especially when buttered) or indulging in a self-deprecating joke on his apparent love of plain, lower-status food: the adjective *gǫrr* most often indicates “skilled” or “accomplished”, which could be used satirically [(Cleasby and Vigfússon 1874, 225)](https://paperpile.com/c/p3RHZM/QEyl/?locator=225). However, it may be notable here that Halli’s references are to dairy products such as *skyr* and *smjǫr*, key components of the medieval Icelandic diet and economy, and those that would have relied on the skills of the Icelandic farmers – perhaps porridge made with *skyr* and *smjǫr* is a skilled food indeed in the social consciousness of the Icelander.

In skaldic verse elsewhere in the corpus, there is a kenning for fire-wood: *eldsmatr* (fire-food) that aptly demonstrates recognition of the vital nature of food to the existence of a thing: conceptually, *matr* is the vital substance of fuel, required by both man and nature. Food is even required by the dead, at least in an eddic poetic context, as the poem *Grímnismál* contains references to the sustenance provided for the dead warriors awaiting Ragnarǫk. *Grímnismál* is a poem from the Codex Regiusmanuscript, often published in English as the *Poetic Edda*. This manuscript was produced c. 1270, and, therefore, while these poems often seem invested in pre-Christian topics, they belong to a period of mythographical activity and interest by Christian communities. Some of these poems are clearly older than their manuscript versions, as several of these works form the basis for Snorri Sturluson’s *Gylfaginning* section of his *Edda* (c. 1220). The poem shows the impartation of knowledge from Grímnir (Óðinn) to Geirrøðr (before the latter is killed), and as part of his speech, Grímnir reveals to the listener that the dead warriors waiting for the end of the world are refreshed with boiled pork:

Andhrímnir
lætr í Eldhrímni
Sæhrímni soðinn,
fleska bezt;
en þat fáir vitu,
við hvat einherjar alask.

(*Grímnismál* in Jónas Kristjánsson and Vesteinn Ólason 2014, 371)

Andhrímnir has Sæhrímnir boiled in Eldhrímnir, the best of pork-flesh; regarding that, few knew with what the *einherjar* feed (or entertain) themselves.

It might be assumed that the eating and drinking habits of these chosen few are an expression of elite status, and there are examples of pork holding particular resonance across both prehistoric and early-medieval Europe [(Craig *et al.* 2015; Gerrard 2007)](https://paperpile.com/c/p3RHZM/Bko8%2BOj93), as well as in Viking-Age Scotland [(Mainland & Batey 2019)](https://paperpile.com/c/p3RHZM/XkiI), though this does not appear to be a consistent trend [(compare Poole 2008; Holmes 2015)](https://paperpile.com/c/p3RHZM/fuRl%2BMzeB/?prefix=compare,). Nonetheless, conspicuous consumption is certainly indicated by their drinking only “shining mead”:

Heiðrun heitir geit
er stendr hǫllu a Herjafǫðrs
ok bítr af Læraðs limum;
skapker fylla
han skal ins skira mjaðar,
knáat sú veig vanask.

(*Grímnismál* in Jónas Kristjánsson and Vesteinn Ólason 2014, 373)

A goat is called Heiðrun who stands on the hall of Herjafǫðr and bites from the foliage of Læraðr; she shall fill a large vessel with the shining mead, that drink cannot fail.

However, the producer of that mead (the goat Heiðrun, who produces this magical alcohol instead of milk), by standing on the roof of the hall, brings to mind a much humbler scenario than the elite feasting hall: that of the turf-covered Icelandic farmhouse. The sagas of Icelanders suggest to us that animals grazing on the roof was a problem in medieval Iceland (*Brennu-Njáls saga* in Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 195), and so the goat on the roof of the hall, while eating of the tree and not of the roof, conveys perhaps a less elite view of this otherworldly meal. It can be argued that the fantastical mead here acts as a symbolic substitute for the milk that was vital to Icelandic household economies.

Another of the eddic poems expresses familiarity with the food of the non-elite. In *Hárbarðsljóð*, Þórr claims to have eaten his fill of ‘sildr ok hafra’ (st. 3; herrings and oats) that morning, which seems to agree with Hárbarðr’s categorization of him as a peasant (*Hárbarðsljóð* in Jónas Kristjánsson and Vesteinn Ólason 2014, 389). However, it should be noted that the composition of this poem may be more contemporary to the date of recording than other eddic poems, as the term *hafrar* for oats is rare and considered by Cleasby and Vigfússon to have a relatively late period of usage (Cleasby and Vigfússon 1874, 231). It is significant, nonetheless, that the medieval poet envisions lower-status food as consisting of herrings and oats. Herring certainly seems to have been one of the medieval world’s more commonplace, everyday foods, judging from the volume of bones recovered from archaeological sites across Europe and the North Atlantic [(Enghoff 1996;](https://paperpile.com/c/p3RHZM/2UJ4%2B9vLP/?locator=,622) Barrett, Locker, and Roberts [2004, 622)](https://paperpile.com/c/p3RHZM/2UJ4%2B9vLP/?locator=,622). In England, it appears to have been an almost exclusively urban food prior to the eleventh century (Barrett, Locker, and Roberts 2004, 630), before the trade in processed fish took off around the start of the second millennium. Oats, as has been seen, have long been considered a low-status foodstuff, fulfilling a need for animal fodder as much as human sustenance (see, for example, Samuel Johnson’s [[1755]](https://paperpile.com/c/p3RHZM/xVEV/?noauthor=1) entry), and there is evidence that they were perceived in a comparable way across medieval Europe (e.g., Stone 2006, 13; Robinson 1991, 195, 197; see also Banham and Faith 2014, 30–31).

The poem with the most interest in culinary objects is *Hymiskviða*. Like medieval Welsh stories of the hunt for a special cauldron (e.g. that included in *Culhwch ac Olwen*), *Hymiskviða* relates the quest of the gods, Týr and Þórr, to seek out a special cauldron so that the giant Ægir can brew the best ale for their consumption. While this poem has little to say on the culinary technology of Viking-Age and medieval Scandinavia, it shows a wealth of terminology associated with pots and vessels (see Table 1). It also refers to boiling bulls, further reinforcing the image of cooking in the mythological poems as something associated with boiling, rather than other forms of cooking. This, of course, also fits nicely with the widespread archaeological evidence for ceramic and stone cooking vessels across Viking-Age Europe:

Par váru þjórar
þrír of teknir,
bað senn jǫtunn
sjóða ganga.

(*Hymiskviða* in Jónas Kristjánsson and Vesteinn Ólason 2014, 402)

There they took three bulls, at once the giant asked that they go to boil.

Hvern létu þeir
hǫfði skemmra
ok á seyði
síðan báru.

(*Hymiskviða* in Jónas Kristjánsson and Vesteinn Ólason 2014, 402)

They let each (bull) be shortened by a head and then they carried (them) to the cooking-fire.

While *sjóða* in stanza 14 could be translated as ‘to cook’, the strong emphasis in this poem on cooking pots and vessels suggests “boil” should be the correct reading. Indeed, Rebecca Drake has highlighted that boiling is likewise depicted as a method of cooking employed by giants and trolls in the legendary sagas(Drake 2018). This emphasis, however, rather than indicating a supernatural or deviant behaviour, suggests that giants and trolls imitate humans in boiling their food, which, as this article highlights, seems to have been a key way in which medieval Icelanders conceptualized the culinary technology of the Viking-Age past. Boiling seems to be a marker of membership of acceptable society, as suggested by Hjálmarr’s comments in *Ǫrvar-Odds saga*: ‘“Þat er fyrst at segja, at ek vil aldri eta hrátt né lið mitt, því at þat er margra manna siðr at vinda vöðva í klæðum ok kalla þat soðit” (*Ǫrvar-Odds saga* in Boer 1888, 64) (“It must be said first, that I never want to eat raw meat, nor do I want my followers to do so, because it is a practice of many a man to wrap flesh in cloth and call it boiled”). Here the members of Hjállmarr’s crew are only considered suitable for inclusion within the community if they properly boil their food, rather than eat it raw. This is an interesting stipulation, given that recent research has suggested that people in the Viking Age suffered from parasitic infections acquired by insufficient cooking of meat (Søe et al*.* 2018). The ill effects of tapeworms and other intestinal parasites (e.g. Jones 1983), including sickness and diarrhoea, would have been less than ideal in a Viking-Age camp, and any taboo on uncooked meat may have been triggered by practical concerns as much as ideological [(see Bourns 2018)](https://paperpile.com/c/p3RHZM/lmmJ/?prefix=see).

In contrast to the boiling events elsewhere in the literary sources, one finds references instead to roasting in the heroic poetry of the *Poetic Edda*. In *Atlamál in grænlenzku,* Guðrún describes her killing of her and Atli’s sons: ‘Tók ek þeira hjǫrtu / ok á teini steikðak’ (*Atlamál in grænlenzku* in Jónas Kristjánsson and Vesteinn Ólason 2014, 397) (I took their hearts / and roasted them on a spit), and the same image is conjured in *Fáfnismál*: ‘halt Fáfnis hjarta við funa’ (*Fáfnismál* in Jónas Kristjánsson and Vesteinn Ólason 2014, 308) (hold the heart of Fáfnir over a flame). The accompanying prose makes it clear for the reader or audience that Sigurðr ‘tók Fáfnis hjarta ok steikði á teini’ (*Fáfnismál* in Jónas Kristjánsson and Vesteinn Ólason 2014, 309) (took the heart of Fáfnir and roasted it on a spit). Though in both cases hearts are being roasted, rather than more traditional cuts of animal meat, it can be suggested that roasting on a spit is here associated with a more heroic method of food preparation and consumption. Guðrún is fulfilling her duty to avenge her brothers by murdering her children with her brothers’ killer, and Sigurðr roasts Fáfnir’s heart initially so that Regin may consume the strength and wisdom of his brother. It is also perhaps the case here that roasting can be seen as a pre-Viking-Age practice or as an elite, conservative practice (as both Guðrún and Sigurðr are royal figures), in comparison to the ‘boiling’ of the sagas, although neither interpretation fits comfortably - as seen in the discussion above, the gods were also presented in medieval Icelandic mythography and poetry as boiling their meat. In addition, *Atlamál* refers to the figure Hjalli as both a *bráss* (a brazer/roaster) and the *hvergætir* (guarder of the kettle), suggesting that (while these terms might have been chosen to fit best with the alliteration and metre of the stanza), both boiling and roasting connotations were appropriate in this context (*Atlamál in grænlenzku* in Jónas Kristjánsson and Vesteinn Ólason 2014, 393).[[5]](#footnote-5)

## Rígsþula *and the Status of Food Eating and Serving*

In closing, the discussion considers the depictions of table-laying and food in *Rígsþula*, an eddic poem found in one manuscript only, and in an incomplete form (AM 242 fol or Codex Wormianus, c. 1350). It contains a narrative of a god, identified by the Icelandic redactor as Heimdallr, visiting couples from the different social levels of society (those who birth thralls, those who birth farmers, and those who birth lords), and the complete poem seems to have followed this with a description of the youth Konr – known as Konr *ungr* (young Kon, or ‘king’) and his rise to power. The dating of *Rígsþula* is disputed, with some scholars placing its composition in a thirteenth century context, but Frederic Amory lays out a convincing argument for the root of the poem originating in a tenth century poetic composition, particularly one from a Hiberno-Norse milieu (Amory 2001).[[6]](#footnote-6) Regardless of the date of the poem, what is significant for the purposes of this article is its demonstration of the nature of social divisions in part through food and tableware in the act of laying the table for a meal. Sadly, the meal of those who birth farmers is missing, but these stanzas can still show the lower and upper ends of culinary expression. They show the setting of the table and the family meal as key indicators of status – and these are some of the most detailed descriptions one gets of food and food serving in Old Norse literature:

Þá tók Edda
økkvinn hleif,
þungan ok þykkvan,
þrunginn sáðum;
bar han meirr at þat
miðra skutla,
soð var í bolla,
setti á bjóð;
var kálfr soðinn,
krása beztr.

(*Rígsþula* in Jónas Kristjánsson and Vesteinn Ólason 2014, 449–50)

Then Edda took a thick loaf, heavy and thick, full of bran; she carried more than that in trenchers, broth was in cups, set on the table; a calf was boiled, the best delicacies.

Edda, or ‘Great-Grandmother’, serves up the best meal she is able, but it is undeniably poor. Here the bread is thick and dark, the drink is meat broth, and the dishes unremarkable. It is notable that the poet does not seem to really know what the lowest sections of society eat and drink at their table besides this type of bread and boiled calf, as a large portion of the food is left undescribed. In comparison, Mother’s table (progenitor of Lord) is more extensively described:

Þá tók Móðir
merkðan dúk,
hvítan af hǫrvi,
hulði bjóð;
hon tók at þat
hleifa þunna,
hvíta af hveiti,
ok hulði dúk.

(*Rígsþula* in Jónas Kristjánsson and Vesteinn Ólason 2014, 454)

Then Mother took the remarkable tablecloth of white linen and covered the table; she took to it thin loaves, white from wheat, and covered the tablecloth.

Fram setti hon
skutla fulla
silfi varða,
setti á bjóð,
fán ok fleski
ok fugla steikða;
vín var í kǫnnu,
varðir kálkar;
drukku ok dœmðu,
dagr var á sinnum.

(*Rígsþula* in Jónas Kristjánsson and Vesteinn Ólason 2014, 454)

She set forward full dishes plated with silver, set on the table light pork and dark, and roasted birds, wine was in the tankards, plated drinking cups; drank and talked, the day was passing.

One has here white wheat bread (in contrast to the dark bran loaves of the lowest level), silver-plated dishes and cups, light and dark pork, roasted birds, and wine. However, while the terms used for cup are different from stanza 4 (*kanna* and *kalkr*, rather than *bolli*), the term used for dish is the same: *skutill* – the difference here being the explicit silver-plating of the dish. Such terminology might reinforce the impression that this family is not using the highest level of culinary expression, but rather a mediatory stage between thralls and lords – Mother and Father are the progenitors of Lord, who is the father of Konr *ungr*.[[7]](#footnote-7) While the value of this poem may lie in its sheer number of poetic synonyms (hence its designation as a *þula*, or list poem, and its inclusion at the end of a manuscript copy of *Snorra Edda*), the choices on how to present these *heiti* show a clear concern with the suitability for such terms in certain contexts. Unfortunately, there is no description of the king’s table, which one might expect to have been a part of the poem in its full form, showing the highest style of meal. Meat is a part of both meals, but strongly contrasted: Great-Grandmother and Great-Grandfather eat boiled meat and broth (like men and women in the sagas), while Mother and Father dine on roasted birds. The ‘dark pork’ (*fleski*) is the meat *Grimnisnál* describes the *einherjar* eating in *Vallhǫl* (discussed above) – although in *Vallhǫl*, this is explicitly boiled. If the *fleski* here is taken as a boiled dish, it seems that Mother and Father’s meal may indeed include a mix of lower and higher status indicators.

*Closing Reflections*

This article has provided an overview and introductory examination of the ways in which medieval Icelanders retrospectively recreated the food and culinary practices of their Viking-Age ancestors. The above discussions broaden the understanding of otherwise often isolated references to food and culinary practice in the sagas and poetry, and show the value of bringing these different types of text together, despite their disparate (or unknown) dates and locales of composition. Such data will also be of use to archaeologists working on the culinary technology of the Viking Age and later medieval periods in a North Sea context, by providing a model of the attitudes and beliefs of medieval writers towards the food and cooking of the past to discuss alongside the material evidence in interdisciplinary studies of food. The evidence collected in this article suggests a contrast between foreign and domestic scenes, and between elite and non-elite practice, and it is interesting that multiple (if not all) levels of culinary society are explored by these narratives.

It is hoped that this paper might inspire a renewed investigation of evidence for Viking-Age and medieval food technology in the North Atlantic and northern Europe. It will be instructive to investigate how far narrative traditions deviate from what may be inferred from zooarchaeological, archaeobotanical, and artefactual remains. Future documentary work might include an examination of food preparation and cooking in *Sturlunga saga* and the Bishops’ sagas, which depict the medieval Iceland in which they were compiled. Such a study would enable the researcher to consider whether the conclusions of this article are specifically associated with retrospective viewing of culinary acts or whether such attitudes and traditions are characteristic of all Old Norse literature from the medieval period.

Food was, and is, fundamental to identities, and while some saga-authors, such as those of *Kormáks* *saga* and *Eyrbyggja* *saga*, seem to have been more deeply interested in scenes of cooking and eating than others, references to food and its preparation and serving pervade these texts, whether they are set in the Icelandic farmhouse, the giant’s bestial lair, the king’s court, the traveller’s campfire, or the raider’s longship.

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# Table 1: Terminology of Culinary Practice

|  |
| --- |
| **COOKING WORDS** |
| sjóða | to boil, to cook |
| soðna | to become boiled |
| matbúa | to cook, prepare food |
| soðning | a boiling or cooking, thing to be cooked  |
| steikja (á teini) | to roast (on a spit) |
| vella | to cook by boiling |
| **COOKING**-**POTS** |
|
| ketill | kettle, cauldron, cooking pot (also a name) |
| búðarketill | booth-kettle |
| hituketill | boiling-kettle |
| hverr | kettle, cauldron |
| steinketill | stone-kettle |
| jarnketill | iron-kettle |
| **SERVING / EATING DISHES** |
| bjóð | small table, small plate |
| skutill | dish, trencher |
| diskr | dish |
| sílfrdiskr | silver dish |
| trygill | trencher |
| grautartrygill | oats trencher |
| **DRINKING VESSELS**  |
| kalekr | cup, chalice |
| kalkr | drinking cup, goblet,  |
| ker | tub, vessel, goblet |
| hrímkalkr | rime/frost-goblet |
| kanna | can, tankard |
| bolli | bowl, cup, small vessel |
| **STORAGE WORDS** |
| vinferill | wine-vat |
| ǫlkjóll | ale-cauldron (used in poetic contexts; lit. ale-ship) |
| sáld | a measure, a vat |
| tunna | barrel |
| skapker | large vessel |
| mjólkrketill | milk vat – also used to make dairy products |
| **IMPLEMENTS** |
| þvara | stirring stick |
| spánn / spónn | spoon |
| **TYPES OF COOKING FIRE** |
| máleldar | meal-fires |
| bakstreldr | fire for making bread |
| **TYPES OF FOOD** |
| skreið | stockfish |
| skyr | curds, fermented milk |
| Krásir | delicacies |
| Ǫlkrásir | ale-delicacies |
| Soð | Broth |
| **FOOD-RELATED BUILDINGS** |
| Soðhús | boiling-house (kitchen) |
| Búr | pantry, storeroom |
| Klefar | butteries |
| **FOOD “JOBS”** |  |
| matsveinn | food-boy (cook) |
| Brass | roaster (cook) |
| hvergætir | kettle-guarder (cook) |

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1. All translations are the authors’ own unless otherwise stated. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This exchange in *Bandamanna saga* is a heated one, with Egill accusing Styrmir not only of being mean with food, but of having a bowl called *Matsæll* (food-blessed) that no guest ever sees; here the overflowing pot is used as a metaphor for abundance - Styrmir isn’t just mean with what he has, he commits the presumably greater offence of being mean with his emphatically abundant resources (*Bandamanna saga* in Guðni Jónsson 1936a, 354). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The earliest complete manuscripts of Icelandic law we have surviving were copied at a time when they were soon to fall out of use in favour of the *Jónsbók* law (c.1281). Preserving the rules of the earlier Icelandic society was clearly considered a desirable use of resources. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The *Grágás* laws are preserved in two manuscripts: Konungsbók (c. 1260) and Staðarhólsbók (c. 1280). The manuscript traditions are similar in content and often assumed to largely reflect the laws used in Iceland in the Commonwealth period (Dennis, Foote, and Perkins 1980), especially as outside of these manuscripts, many fragments of these laws survive from between AD 1150 and 1250 (Pedersen 1999, 91). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The presence of the term *hvergætir* might also hint at the more farmyard and less heroic style of *Atlamál* when compared with *Atlakviða*: *gæta* is the way watching farm animals and hay is expressed in the sagas of Icelanders. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For an extensive review of the scholarship on the dating of *Rígsþula*, see Amory (2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The plated drinking cups in this stanza (*varðir kálkar*) are one of the items of material culture in this poem that Nermen (1969) used as an example supporting a Viking-Age composition date for the poem, being described in a way similar to the drinking cup found in grave 644 at Birka (Nerman 1969, 17). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)