

A SHORT HISTORY OF ...

Drinking Bowls and Mazers.

THE FRENCH CONNECTION

At the time of the Norman Conquest in 1066 the practice of drinking from wooden bowls was introduced to Britain and overnight it seems the turned wooden cups favoured by Saxons and Vikings became obsolete. Pottery throughout the medieval period was mainly restricted to jugs, storage and cooking pots.

The first images of drinking bowls in use are from the Bayeux tapestry where, as is common in pictorial evidence, the bowls are very large. To me today drinking from a bowl seems a strange practice, especially if the bowl is large and I tend to miss and dribble the contents out of the side of the mouth! The practice continues today in France where

particular drinks such as cider or the breakfast café au lait are often drunk from a bowl.

I have studied many hundreds of turned wooden bowls from the medieval period and most of them are small (less than 8" diameter) and

very few show knife cuts inside. It is my feeling that these bowls were either purely drinking bowls or if they were also used for eating they were used for food which did not need to be cut before eating.

WHAT IS A MAZER?

Now to discuss mazers, a term which seems to have become rather confused over the years. Owen Evan-

Thomas writing in 1932 wrote, "Among wooden drinking vessels, the most important and the earliest known of any consequence is the mazer." Mr A. St. John Hope in an earlier paper on the subject (*Archaeologia*, Vol. 50) says that of all drinking vessels in use from the 13th to the 15th century, none were so common or so much prized as those known as mazers. A strange statement since common things tend not to be prized.

Mazers sometimes appear in wills and inventories. The following list gives the number of mazers in the inventories of certain monastic houses, dating from the 14th to 16th centuries.

1328 Canterbury 182 mazers,
1427 Battle 32 mazers, 1446
Durham 49 mazers, 1540
Waltham 15 mazers, 1540
Westminster 40 mazers.

If you visit museums in search of

mazers you will find some splendid examples surviving from the medieval period. Without exception these are small shallow wooden bowls embellished with large quantities of silver, always with a deep silver rim that doubles the capacity of the bowl

and often a raised silver foot too. The British Museum has several of these on display, it is easy to see how such a bowl would be "much prized" but difficult to imagine that they were ever

common.

WHAT'S YOURS CALLED?

Certain favourite mazers in medieval houses were given their own names. At Canterbury in 1328 certain mazers were known as "Salomon," "Austin," "Broke," "Hare," "Pilgrim," and I think my favourite would have been "Bygge". At Durham a great mazer was called the grace cup which the monks drank from round the table after grace every day and another great mazer called the Judas Cup was used by the same monks on Maundy Thursday night. Both the Durham cups and I suspect the named mazers at Canterbury were edged with silver gilt and were probably of the type to be seen in the British Museum, but what of the 182 mazers from Canterbury?



A banquet scene from the Bayeux Tapestry.



A Medieval monk enjoying a bowl-full!

more overleaf ...

VISIT TO GERMANY

Earlier this year I visited several

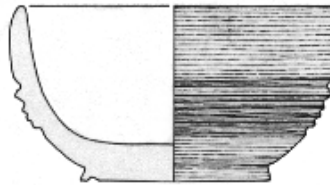
archaeological museums and storerooms in the Black Forest in Germany and I think I found the answer to the "common mazer" problem at Freiburg. In 1982 during building work on the site of a medieval monastery a large brick lined latrine was uncovered. It was several metres square and several metres deep and the waterlogged conditions had preserved the organic contents including several hundred beautiful pole lathe turned wooden bowls. All of them were small (less than 7" diameter) with no evidence of knife cuts and the design of most had a finely turned rim which makes for easier drinking. I am convinced that I was looking at a large collection of mazers of the common type mentioned in medieval inventories, though there are not such great numbers in Britain the pattern of medieval bowls is the same. In addition to these basic drinking bowls there were other forms not found in Britain. My favourite were "doppelkopfs" (double cups) which are a pair of cups, one small and one large, which fit together when not in use.

THE MEANING OF MAZER

Now some thoughts on the word maser itself. St John Hope quotes a Professor Skeat as suggesting that the word is derived from the old German word "masa" meaning a spot. The theory goes

that most mazers were made from burr maple which has a spotty grain, another theory has the word derived from the old Welsh word "masarn" for maple tree, these theories have been repeated ever since and now seem accepted as fact.

My problem with both theories is that whilst some, but not all, of the great mazers are burr maple very few common mazers are. I would say the commonest woods were ash, beech, alder, straight grained maple and fruitwoods, one of the nicest I have seen from 13th century Winchester was of burr box. In modern German there are two



words which I suspect could be linked to our mazer, one is maserung which means wood grain but maser means only grain (as in wheat?) the other maserkopf is wooden cup. If any German scholars are reading this I would be grateful for their comments.

WHEN DID THEY GO?

Finally, we no longer drink from bowls in Britain so when did the custom die out? Evan-Thomas suggests that the end was late in the seventeenth century when they were superseded by large lignum vitae wassail bowls. This is likely true for the ceremonial communal maser though I suspect the end of the common individual maser was a little earlier. The last significant collection of drinking bowls I know of are from the Mary Rose

which sank in 1545. These are all much larger bowls mostly between 8" and 10", again they have a thinned rim and no internal knife cuts (other than intentional decorative ones). Many are personalised with carved graffiti inside and out. They were found scattered around the ship as if they were personal property in contrast to the larger number of flatter dishes which all have innumerable knife cuts and were found mostly in the area of the galley.

What replaced the common mazer? I do not know. Aboard the Mary Rose there were also a smaller number of stave built tankards and pewter was also becoming available to the well off, by the eighteenth century turners were making fine wooden goblets, could these have been made earlier too and not survived?

Clearly further research is called for.

Bibliography:

Domestic Utensils of Wood - Owen Evan-Thomas.

Treen & other Wooden Bygones - E. H. Pinto.

Treen for the Table - Jonathan Levi

Holzfunde aus Freiburg und Konstanz - Ulrich Müller.



ILLUSTRATIONS: Top, an original mazer from Freiburg; Middle, an archaeological drawing of a mazer; Above, a pear-wood mazer made by myself.