The Brewing Boom of the Middle Ages

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The Taproom

The Taproom is a monthly series that explores the rich history of all things beer. It is curated by **Pavla Šimková**.

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Until 1200, beer brewing in Europe was largely a small-scale affair. Hops soon changed that. Based on practices in Bremen and other ports along the North Sea coast of Germany, a seemingly minor change laid the foundation for a booming industry in Renaissance Europe, one with a scale and reach unmatched until the late nineteenth century. Brewing became an industry vital to the economies and the politics of northern European towns and contributed to the growth in long-distance trade. Beer became a part of everyday life.

In early medieval Europe, brewing was very much a family business. Up to the twelfth century it was something people did at home in the countryside, where most of them lived. Women would make bread and, if there happened to be some extra grain, they might make beer with it. Drinkers had to down it soon after being made since there was a good chance the beer would go bad. In more prosperous households, if the lady of the house made more beer than the family could drink then the surplus was sold to neighbors. All this began to change when towns started to grow around the year 1000. Since residents often lived in smaller spaces without the room or facilities to make beer, specialist brewers began to appear and made their livings by selling the beer they produced. It was, however, a very different drink from the light, bitter beverage we know today. Brewers of the early Middle Ages flavored the beer with various combinations of herbs, including options like rosemary, marjoram, mint, yarrow, juniper, or sage, with bog myrtle often the principal ingredient. When urban producers in Bremen and other north German towns found a way to make beer with hops as the additive and do it on a commercial scale, things really began to change.

People had known about hops (*Humulus lupulus)* for centuries, and some monastic breweries had even used them in beer in the early Middle Ages. The success of north German brewers, however, depended on using just the right amount of it: enough for the oils in the cones to inhibit the growth of acids and other beer-spoiling chemicals, but not so much as to put off drinkers who were used to sweeter beers. Hopped beer lasted longer so it could be stored and sold weeks or even months later. Prior to the advent of hops, it was hard to make beer in the summer when demand was high since the warm days increased the chances of spoilage. Hops made the beer more durable so that if brewed in March, it could still be drinkable in June or July. The bitter additive not only helped to solve problems of seasonality but also created a product of long-distance trade. Towns were able to export beer hundreds of kilometers away, almost invariably by sea, to consumers who valued the product for its high quality, its taste, and competitive price.

Bremen was apparently the first town to enjoy a beer boom thanks to the magic of hopped beer. Other urban centers along the North Sea and then the Baltic coast soon imitated her success, many of which became members of the Hanseatic League, a confederation of towns committed to commerce who found they carried more weight in negotiations with kings and princes if they worked together. Beer proved to be an important commodity in their trading network. Towns like Wismar and Gdansk (Danzig) in the Baltic became major exporters of beer in the fourteenth century. Among Hansa towns, though, Hamburg enjoyed the greatest success. As one contemporary chronicler put it, the new style of brewing gave Hamburg the name "*Brauhaus der Hanse*" (the brewery of the Hanseatic League). Even the Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV praised Hamburg's thriving beer industry. Around 1360, the city produced more than 25 million liters of beer annually, with over 450 breweries in operation and an output of probably about 300 liters for every person in the town. Despite outbreaks of plague, which started in the 1340s and which decimated the European population, production continued to rise. Hamburg brewers made some 30 million liters a year in the fifteenth century, much of that for export.

While other towns could not match the scale of the Hamburg industry, they could at least imitate its brewing pattern, using hops to make a more durable beer suitable for both local consumption and export. Hopped beer brewing spread across northern Europe to Poland and as far east as Riga, to Scandinavia in the north, and to the Low Countries and England in the west. Through the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, beer replaced wine as the preferred alcoholic beverage in more and more places. The beer border, the regions where vines were pulled out and barley fields took their place, moved south into

the Rhineland and, by the sixteenth century, even Bavaria had become beer-drinking country.

Beer became a defining feature of urban life in northern Europe by the sixteenth century. Since breweries were typically small, many were needed to produce the drink in such large quantities. That meant towns had a large number of entrepreneurs running their own businesses. Mostly male, they also took an active interest in civic government with many of them sitting on town councils and making political decisions, even decisions about regulating and promoting the brewing industry. Brewing was also critical to the economy of towns like Hamburg. Breweries offered extensive employment in towns, as did the distribution and shipping of beer. Production and sale were subject to taxation and those taxes proved to be essential to the healthy finances of city governments. The share of income from beer levies was often greater than a third, and in some cases half, of the total tax take. The brewing industry transformed civic life. Brewers needed fresh sweet water, so towns established rules against polluting streams and wells. A few towns even developed systems to pipe water to brewers, something which could benefit other residents. The expansion of beer making also had an impact on rural life with the increase in the production of barley and other grains destined for brew kettles and, in some places, the development of hops as a commercial crop.

It is no exaggeration to say that hops and the new type of beer they made possible played a transformative role in the urban life of high medieval northern Europe. This was true throughout the Hanseatic League and in towns beyond the scope of the confederation until well into the sixteenth century. By that time, the organization was in steep decline, but the beer it had made popular had become entrenched in people’s lives.

North German brewers had found a way to make a tasty and durable drink that offered a competitive alternative to other options, giving beer an important place in urban life for several centuries. The beer they made may not have looked like or tasted like the pilsners and lagers of the twenty-first century, but the importance of hopped beer to nutrition, the economy, tax income, and conviviality in the late Middle Ages and in the Renaissance was immeasurable.