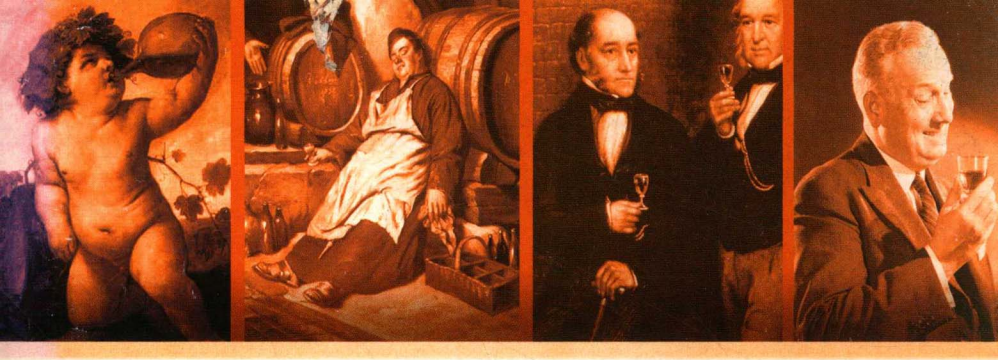

DRINK

A CULTURAL HISTORY OF ALCOHOL

IAIN GATELY

"Thorough, informative, briskly readable, and witty."
—JONATHAN YARDLEY, *THE WASHINGTON POST*

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GOTHAM BOOKS

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Praise for *DRINK*:

"The history of the Western world as seen through the prism of booze, glorious booze.... A heady cocktail."
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PAUL NEWTON

Iain Gately is the author of *Tobacco: A Cultural History of How an Exotic Plant Seduced Civilization.* Raised in Hong Kong, he studied law at Cambridge University and worked in the financial markets of London, where he currently lives.

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INTRODUCTION

The first time I ever saw my grandmother drink alcohol was when she accepted a small glass of champagne on her hundredth birthday. She pronounced it to be pleasant but not so good as to want more. My uncle teased his mother over waiting so long to take a drink and she replied with a concise sermon on its dangers to the young: It made them vain and indolent–and what was the value in that? She had been steadfast in her indifference to drink, and in her outright opposition to drunkenness since her childhood. Born in 1906, in Kilmarnock, in Scotland, the home of Johnnie Walker whisky, she emigrated to America in the 1920s. Her new country was dry at the time: National Prohibition had commenced a few years before, and it was illegal to sell alcohol as a recreational beverage. In the event, she found herself one of the few willingly sober people in the immigrant community. Upon arrival in Brooklyn she shared an apartment whose other occupants, as was the custom, had annexed the bathtub for making home brew. Late one evening the doorbell rang, one of her flatmates opened the door, and Gran caught sight of a uniform. She rushed to the bathroom, locked herself inside, and drained away the hooch–to the fury of her companions, and the policeman, who had dropped by for a drink.

"They made such a fuss," she said.

They have my sympathies.

My own experience of alcohol has been very different from that of my grandmother. I am certain that I had drunk more of it before my twenty-first birthday than she had throughout her entire century. To

her it was a useless substance, which changed people's characters for the worse, whereas to me it has been a source of pleasure, which has made celebrations brighter, friendships deeper, and which has served on occasions as a temporary relief from sorrow. Such contrasting views may be found among people of both our generations, indeed, throughout history.

DRINK

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1 THE GRAIN AND THE GRAPE

Alcohol is a fundamental part of Western culture. It is the most controversial part of our diet, simultaneously nourishing and intoxicating the human frame. Its equivocal influence over civilization can be equated to the polar characters of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. At times its philanthropic side has appeared to be in the ascendant, at others the psychopath has been at large. Throughout history, the place of alcohol in our meals, medicines, and leisure activities has been a matter of fierce debate. Whereas some cultures have distinguished it as a sacred fluid, whose consumption should be limited to ceremonial occasions, others have treated it as a kind of food and ignored, or accommodated, any incidental effects that it might have upon the psyche, and a few have even tried to exclude it from society altogether. Such differing views have often been concurrent, thus increasing the mystery surrounding alcohol. In both ancient Greece, and the present millennium, it has been credited with the powers of inspiration and destruction.

The substance at the center of this controversy, the chemical soul of all alcoholic drinks, is *ethanol,* which in its pure state is a colorless and highly volatile liquid. It is classified as a depressant, in the sense that it inhibits the functions of the central nervous system. It is also biphasic, meaning that its effects on the drinker vary in accordance with the quantity consumed. In small doses, ethanol generates a sense of euphoria and diminishes inhibitions. Larger quantities cause slowed brain activity, impaired motor function, slurred speech, and drowsiness; and in very high doses it is fatal. Moreover, when the body

metabolizes ethanol, it is broken down into acetaldehyde, a far more toxic substance, which generates headaches, nausea and lethargy, and a heightened sensitivity to loud noises and sudden movements, which can persist for days after drinking.

Alcohol occurs naturally as a by-product of fermentation–the action of sugar-eating yeasts on fruits. It is a highly nourishing substance–one ounce of pure ethanol contains 224 calories–75 percent more than refined sugar. It is also sweet in flavor when diluted, making it attractive to most living creatures. Insects, birds, and even elephants have been observed to seek it out in the wild and to exhibit signs of drunkenness after consuming it. It is certain that humanity, and indeed our predecessor species, were exposed to alcohol and its side effects in the process of feeding themselves.

So how did we fall in love with this equivocal fluid? When did we begin to prepare it for ourselves? For most of the 160,000 years of our existence as a species, we lived in small bands of hunter-gatherers. The only mementos these distant ancestors have left are their own bones, a few tools chipped out of stone, and evidence that they had fire and perhaps a belief in an afterlife, for they buried their dead with care. It is impossible to know what part alcohol played in their lives, but to judge by the habits of existing tribes of hunter-gatherers, it is likely that they had a taste for it and that they assembled to enjoy nature's bounty in places where fruits were ripening. In Mexico, for example, tribes in marginal regions who did not grow their own food nonetheless would travel great distances in order to be present when certain cacti came into fruit so that they could make alcohol. Those tribes who lacked the technology of pottery used hollowed-out logs as fermentation vessels. One tribe that lacked both pottery and access to tree trunks had discovered a method of weaving watertight baskets to contain the cherished fluids.

Definite evidence of the preparation of alcoholic drinks first appears around 8000 BC after humanity took up agriculture and established sedentary communities. The earliest proof that they were converting some of their produce into brews derives from the chemical analysis of the residues found inside pottery jars discovered in a grave in Jiahu, in northern China, and dating to 7000–6600 BC. These clay vessels, coincidentally the most ancient of their kind, contained a fermented drink made with rice, honey, grapes, and hawthorn berries. Further evidence of prehistoric brews comes from Transcaucasia, part

of present-day Georgia, where grape pips have been discovered around Neolithic settlements with shapes that differ slightly from those of wild grapes, suggesting that they had been cultivated. Moreover, pottery fragments from the same area, decorated with what appear to be human figures raising their arms in celebration, and dating circa 6000 BC, confirm that its inhabitants had the technology, and the desire, to store liquids, and thought fit to adorn their containers with joyful images.

Proof that people were cultivating plants to manufacture alcohol first appears in the so-called Fertile Crescent, a geographical area curving between the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf. The analysis of a yellow residue found on the inside of a jar at a Neolithic settlement in Haji Firuz Tepe (Iran), dating to 5400–5000 BC, revealed that the jar had once held wine. The residence in which it was discovered had six such jars, and other houses in the same hillside village also had similar vessels, in comparable quantities. The amount of wine each household might have produced suggests that it was a small but significant part of their diet. In such communities, winemaking was the best technology they had for storing highly perishable grapes, although whether the resulting fluid was intended for intoxication as well as nourishment is unknown. It is likely that the inhabitants of the Fertile Crescent were also making mead from honey and beer from their surplus grain in the same era. The first proof that beer was being brewed in the region derives from the residues of an alcoholic barley brew found in a pottery vessel at Godin Tepe, in the Zagros Mountains of Iran, and dating to 3100–2900 BC. As is the case with the wine of Haji Firuz Tepe, whether this ur-beer was made to stimulate or simply as a kind of food remains a mystery.

However, by the middle of the third millennium BC, evidence begins to appear which shows that alcohol was very much more than mere sustenance to the inhabitants of the Fertile Crescent. As its little agricultural settlements developed into villages, then towns, so their material culture became increasingly sophisticated. In Sumeria, at the confluence of the rivers Tigris and Euphrates, in present-day Iraq, the decorative arts flowered and writing appeared. Both of these mediums were used to record the social roles played by alcoholic drinks.

In Uruk, the principal city of Sumeria and probably the largest in the world at the time, brewing was practiced on an epic scale. The Sumerians documented both the quantity and the type of beer, or

kash, that they brewed. They distinguished eight styles made from barley, eight from wheat, and three more from mixed types of grains. They appointed a goddess, Ninkasi, to rule over the art of brewing and associated both the production and distribution of beer with women. The fragments of their laws that have survived, incised on clay tablets, tell us that they had regulated drinking places; their material culture shows us that they staged formal drinking sessions and associated alcohol with ceremony and rank. A banquet scene engraved on a lapis lazuli seal, recovered from a royal tomb in Ur, adjacent to Uruk, and dating circa 2500 BC, depicts two tiers of aristocratic tipplers, indulging in the preferred recreation of their caste. The centerpiece of the top tier shows a pair of seated figures in regal postures, sucking beer through straws perhaps a yard long from a vessel the size of, and faintly reminiscent in its shape to, a modern beer keg. In the lower level, equally patrician individuals raise conical cups to their mouths, and are waited on by a functionary carrying a spouted jug. The same tomb contained examples of drinking straws made of gold and silver, and a solid gold drinking set consisting of a fluted bowl, a jug, and a cup. Its occupant, Queen Puabi, also priestess of the moon god Nanna, was buried with her court as well as her drinking apparatus–eighty other bodies, dressed up to serve her in the afterlife, filled a death pit adjacent to her final resting place.

The artifacts, laws, and records of the Sumerians show that alcohol was abundant in their society, that access to it was regulated, and that it was a favorite of its elite and offered to its gods. The epic Sume-

Sumerian seal

rian poem *Gilgamesh* (c. 2000 BC), perhaps the oldest literary work in existence, which recounts the exploits of the eponymous king, a semi-legendary ruler of Uruk, further shows that the Sumerians were no strangers to drunkenness. After setting out its hero's semidivine ancestry, the poem proceeds to the recruitment of the wild man Enkidu, whom Gilgamesh wishes to have as a companion-in-arms on an expedition to slay the resident demon of a distant cedar forest. The wild man is persuaded to join civilization by the charms of Shanhat the harlot, who proceeds to educate him in the ways of men:

> Enkidu knew nothing about eating bread for food,
> And of drinking beer he had not been taught.
> The harlot spoke to Enkidu, saying:
> "Eat the food, Enkidu, it is the way one lives.
> Drink the beer, as is the custom of the land."
> Enkidu ate the food until he was sated,
> He drank the beer–seven jugs! and became expansive and sang with joy!

Clearly alcohol was not just fodder in Sumeria–it was also, in the right quantities, a source of happiness.

Gilgamesh provides further insights into Sumerian attitudes toward alcohol. Its characters drink water when about their daily or heroic tasks but resort to alcohol whenever they are celebrating. Intoxication, it implies, was also de rigueur at their new year festivities, which, according to other sources, were very drunken indeed. Their highlight was a ceremonial and public act of coitus between the king of Uruk and the high priestess of the temple of Ishtar, goddess of procreation. The union was symbolic as well as real, and the mythical coupling that it reenacted was believed to have resulted in Ninkasi, the beer goddess. A hymn to her, the so-called Prayer to Ninkasi (c. 1800 BC), which has survived from the period, gives a detailed picture of how *kash* was made in Sumeria. It was a complex process–the grain was converted into *bappir* bread before being fermented, and both grapes and honey were added to the brew. The resulting gruel was drunk unfiltered, hence the need for straws at banquets.

Similar styles of brew were common in ancient Egypt, whose writings and artifacts likewise provide a detailed record of what its inhabitants drank and hint at some of their reasons for doing so. The story of Egyptian drinking begins in the city of Hierakonpolis, whose

ruins contain the remains of the world's oldest brewery, dating to circa 3400 BC. It was capable of producing up to three hundred gallons per day of a Sumerian-style brew. Heirakonpolis was also the site of a thriving pottery industry whose principal products were beer jugs and cups, the shards of which litter the ruins of the city. The sheer abundance of such relics and the relative scale of the brewing operations imply that beer was a vital part of the diet of the people who lived there.

While the common people of Heirakonpolis drank beer, its rulers were distinguished by a taste for wine, which was an imported luxury and an emblem of power. The tomb of King Scorpion, who ruled the city in the same age that its brewery was constructed, held seven hundred or so wine jars, made from various types of clay and embellished with different designs, most of which can be traced to what is now Israel and Palestine. The presence of so many jars, so far from their places of origin, confirms that the art of winemaking had spread throughout the Fertile Crescent and that the wine trade was a stimulus to civilization in the Middle East.

By the time that Egypt entered its dynastic era (c. 3100 BC), beer, known as *hqt,* had been established as the beverage for workers, whereas wine, or *irp,* was the drink of the elite. Beer, in keeping with its plebeian associations, was treated principally as a kind of food. Egyptian tomb paintings and clay models depicting its manufacture feature bare-breasted peasant women up to their elbows in their brews; papyrus scrolls bearing financial accounts state that the laborers who built the pyramids of the Giza Plateau were provided with a daily ration of one and a third gallons. A modern re-creation of Egyptian beer, brewed in accordance with written and pictorial evidence, weighed in at 5 percent ABV–the strength of the average contemporary pint, implying that, by the standards of the present day, the pyramids were built by an army of drunks. However, while the Egyptians have left us plenty of practical information about their brewing, they were almost silent on the matter of intoxication. The very few descriptions as to the effect of ten or more pints of beer every day are positive, if enigmatic: "The mouth of a perfectly contented man is filled with beer."

We can, however, be certain that the average Egyptian became intoxicated on certain ceremonial occasions. These included the annual bash celebrating the Drunkenness of Hathor, goddess of fertility, motherhood, and the Milky Way. The Egyptians considered the swath