

## **How The Ancients Viewed Alcohol**

Carter Wilson

Drugs and Intoxication in the Greek and Roman World

Dr. Gregory Rowe

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From the dawn of civilization, alcohol played a key role in advancing culture, religion and politics. Every ancient society around the four corners of the globe pioneered their own distinctive flavor of fermented sugars and when drunk, achieves intoxication. Some would argue that drunken intoxication induced from alcohol, along with the desire for intoxication, was the main cause for the development of civilization. In the ways ancients viewed alcohol from China, Mesopotamia, Greece and to Rome largely depended on the growth of the collective consensus of alcohol and its effects. This growth of views of alcohol starts with culture in how it was widely used within the public; then religion in how it was worshiped and lastly politics with distribution and laws as a consequence of this adventure.

There are tumultuous debates in when alcohol was first invented. The consensus among scientists gives credit to neolithic northern China that dates as far back as 7000 BC where residues of fermented rice were found.<sup>1</sup> But a recent discovery of 13,000 year old beer residue in a stone vessel near Israel in Raqefet cave beats China. This date supersedes the agreement of the agricultural revolution around 12,000 years ago (10,000 BC) when traces of barley farming found were thought to be originally for bread but, evidence shows the motivation was in fact for beer.<sup>2</sup> Similar conclusions are drawn in China as in Mesopotamia when it comes to the birth of civilization. Because of the discovery of alcohol, Chinese society went from scattered egalitarian tribes to a monarch hierarchy.<sup>3</sup> Residue analysis in Northern China shows rice farming co-evolved with fermentations and with that came the production of pottery drinking vessels. Thousands of jade potteries found have pictures of deities, which are used for drinking

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<sup>1</sup> McGovern, Patrick E, et al, "Fermented beverages of pre- and proto-historic China," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* vol. 101,51 (2004). doi:10.1073/pnas.0407921102

<sup>2</sup> Witte, Melissa De, "An ancient thirst for beer may have inspired agriculture, Stanford archaeologists say," *Stanford*, 12 September 2018. <https://news.stanford.edu/press-releases/2018/09/12/crafting-beer-feral-cultivation/>

<sup>3</sup> Jiajing Wang, Li Liu, "Introduction: Alcohol, rituals, and politics in the ancient world," *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* vol. 65 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaa.2022.101397>

ceremonies, where elites declare authority to regulate religion.<sup>4</sup> This declaration of authority of drinking ceremonies led to the first formation of states in which elites would use fermented beverages as currency to pay for labor.<sup>5</sup> Regulation of alcohol was dependent on wielding religion, particularly with the teachings of Confucianism, and drinking ceremonies such as the Rites of Zhou were controlled by a Tang-Cheng, which is equivalent to a symposiarch.<sup>6</sup> Confucius said, “only wine drinking is not limited, but not so much as to make you confused.”<sup>7</sup>

While Confucius had his laws, Mesopotamians worshiped actual alcohol Gods. The Egyptian mythology of bloodthirsty Hathor, hellbent on destroying mankind, was tricked by her people into thinking that a pool of red beer was blood. Hathor drank the entire pool and became so drunk that she forgot about ending civilization entirely. Men in Egypt then praised Hathor as ‘The Lady of Drunkenness’ and drank beer to worship their Goddess.<sup>8</sup> In Sumaria, there is also a dedicated beer Goddess Ninkasi and the Hymn of Ninkasi was sung to worship her, but also disguised as a recipe for beer brewing, “Ninkasi, it is you who bake the beerbread in the big oven, and put in order the piles of hulled grain.”<sup>9</sup> The world’s oldest surviving story, The Epic of Gilgamesh, mentions beer when a woman is trying to invite Enkidu into civilization, “Enkidu, eat bread, it is the staff of life; drink the beer, it is the custom of the land,”<sup>10</sup> and thus Enkidu becomes happy and merry and civilized. Taverns in Sumeria were then established to promote

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<sup>4</sup> LI, Min, “Libation ritual and the performance of kingship in early China,” *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology*, vol. 65 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaa.2021.101370>

<sup>5</sup> Jiajing, “Introduction: Alcohol, rituals, and politics in the ancient world”

<sup>6</sup> Poo, Mu-Chou, “The Use and Abuse of Wine in Ancient China,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, vol. 42, no. 2, 1999, pp. 123–51. *JSTOR*. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3632333>

<sup>7</sup> “Confucian Philosophy on Health Building,” *China.org*, <http://www.china.org.cn/english/imperial/26119.htm#:~:text=Confucius%20said%2C%20%EF%BF%BDOnly%20wine,that%20time%20contained%20little%20alcohol>

<sup>8</sup> Rosso, Ana Maria. “Beer and Wine in Antiquity: Beneficial Remedy or Punishment Imposed by the Gods?” *Acta Medico-Historica Adriatica : AMHA*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2012, pp. 240. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/23560753/#:~:text=They%20were%20used%20as%20anaesthetics,and%20stings%2C%20and%20as%20purifiers.>

<sup>9</sup> Black, J.A., et al, “A hymn to Ninkasi: translation,” *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature*, Oxford 1998. <https://etcs1.orinst.ox.ac.uk/section4/tr4231.htm>

<sup>10</sup> Sanders, N.K, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, (Penguin Classics 1972), pp. 67.

worship and topple social barriers, mostly for drinking and prostitution, and women were usually the master brewers, hence the numerous alcohol Goddesses and bartenders in the region.<sup>11</sup> As religion, agriculture and drinking grew, so did politics and law. To put the clamp down on swindler tavern keepers cheaping out civilians on beer, laws from the Code of Hammurabi were used, “if a tavern-keeper (feminine) does not accept corn according to gross weight in payment of drink, but takes money, and the price of the drink is less than that of the corn, she shall be convicted and thrown into the water.”<sup>12</sup>

Sumeria is not only coined to brew the first beer, write the first laws, the first story but also the first writing, which reads the rations of beer to workers as possibly the first currency on the ‘Mesopotimian Beer Rations Tablet’ 3000 BC.<sup>13</sup> Depending on the King, region, gender and age Mesopotamia workers earned 1<sup>14</sup> to 10<sup>15</sup> pints of beer a day. One may be wondering why the founders of civilization were full blown alcoholics. Drinking Sumerian beer was one of the most nutritious commodities at the time, with its porridge-like texture, beer was often chosen before food.<sup>16</sup> Its intoxicating effects were evidently the main source of attraction, but in order to achieve ‘drunkenness’ a lot of beer was needed to be consumed due to its low alcohol content, as alcohol across all civilisations at the time brewed beer at 3% and wine at 6% at the most, so 10

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<sup>11</sup> Homan, Michael M. “Beer and Its Drinkers: An Ancient near Eastern Love Story.” *Near Eastern Archaeology*, vol. 67, no. 2, 2004. <https://doi.org/10.2307/4132364> pp. 94

<sup>12</sup> King, L.W, “Ancient History Sourcebook: Code of Hammurabi,” *Fordham University*, 1780 B.C. Law 108. <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/ancient/hamcode.asp>

<sup>13</sup> Amin, Osama Shukir Muhammed, “Mesopotamian Beer Rations Tablet,” *World History Encyclopedia*, 2016, <https://www.worldhistory.org/image/4849/mesopotamian-beer-rations-tablet/>

<sup>14</sup> Amin, Osama Shukir Muhammed, “Distribution of Barley Rations Tablet from Girsu,” *World History Encyclopedia*, 2016, <https://www.worldhistory.org/image/4853/distribution-of-barley-rations-tablet-from-girsu/><https://www.worldhistory.org/image/4853/distribution-of-barley-rations-tablet-from-girsu/>

<sup>15</sup> Marks, Tasha, “A sip of history: ancient Egyptian beer,” *The British Museum*, 2018, [https://www.britishmuseum.org/blog/sip-history-ancient-egyptian-beer#:~:text=In%20our%20ancient%20Egyptian%20beer,2345%E2%80%932181%20BC\).](https://www.britishmuseum.org/blog/sip-history-ancient-egyptian-beer#:~:text=In%20our%20ancient%20Egyptian%20beer,2345%E2%80%932181%20BC).)

<sup>16</sup> Kelly, Jared, “The Beverage of the Ages: The Role and Function of Beer in Sumerian Society,” *Armstrong Undergraduate Journal of History*, 2019, [https://armstronghistoryjournal.wordpress.com/2019/11/11/the-beverage-of-the-ages-the-role-and-function-of-beer-in-sumerian-society/#\\_ftn1](https://armstronghistoryjournal.wordpress.com/2019/11/11/the-beverage-of-the-ages-the-role-and-function-of-beer-in-sumerian-society/#_ftn1)

pints might be equivalent to 3-4 beer today. That said, beer was the staple drink in Sumeria and Egypt. Ebers Papyrus, an Egyptian medical scripture reads that alcohol can cure almost every disease, or if there were any other drugs like ecstasy or poppy, it was to be mixed with alcohol in which the Romans and Greeks used in the same medicinal fashion.<sup>17</sup>

As Mesopotamia and China developed their statehood caused by alcohol, the western world of Greece and Rome shared many elements of alcoholism but also differentiated vastly too. One of the ways in which Rome and Greece differed from their 'barbarian' counterparts is their beverage of choice. As it turns out, food and drink which includes alcohol, is a marker of cultural and ethnic difference.<sup>18</sup> Particularly Rome is known to exclude beer from its empire immensely, as it was seen as a barbarian drink from foreign lands such as Egypt, and it tasted bitter in which "liquid made from rotten cereals"<sup>19</sup> did not fancy their taste buds. Incidentally the ancient Minoians are known to have drunk beer, but in spite of beer being barbaric and foul tasting, the Romans still drank it when there was nothing else left to drink.<sup>20</sup> The first historian Herodotus is known to have documented information from all sides of conflicted societies, such as Greece and Persia, "if an important decision is to be made, they discuss the question when they are drunk, and the following day...submit their decision when they are sober...any decision they make when they are sober, is reconsidered afterwards when they are drunk."<sup>21</sup> In the perspective of China and Rome, the notion of barbarism is plausible since Mesopotamian alcohol consumption is relatively unregulated, which is mostly likely due to their lack of

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<sup>17</sup> Rosso, "Beer and Wine in Antiquity: Beneficial Remedy or Punishment Imposed by the Gods?" pp. 251-254.

<sup>18</sup> Nelson, M, "Beer in Greco-Roman antiquity," *University of British Columbia*, 2001, pp. 179, <http://dx.doi.org/10.14288/1.0090870>

<sup>19</sup> Nelson, "Beer in Greco-Roman antiquity," pp. 195.

<sup>20</sup> Nelson, "Beer in Greco-Roman antiquity," pp. 191 - 195.

<sup>21</sup> Herodotus, *The Histories* (Penguin Classics, 1954), pp. 62

understanding of the dangers of alcohol, according to this Sumerian proverb, “he that does not know beer does not know what is good.”

Nonetheless the aristocratic wine drinkers of Rome and Greece were arguably more ‘westernized’ or ‘medically advanced’ when it came to controlled drinking. An example of this is the symposia, which is a drinking party amongst the elites that took place after a feasting banquet where wine induced parties of entertainment merits like philosophical discourse, music and orgies took its course.<sup>22</sup> The drinking in symposiums were controlled by a symposiarch who distributed portions of wine from a large vessel known as a kratar, similar to the Chinese Tang-Cheng at the Rites of Zhou, and unlike Sumerian drinking bouts of 10 pints daily rations.

Plato recorded one of these symposia in *The Symposium*, “what will be the least rigorous rule to make about drinking? I don’t mind telling you that yesterday’s bout has left me in a very poor way,”<sup>23</sup> says the symposiarch. The concept of over indulgence and hangovers which causes harm was evident amongst the Romans and Greeks, and thus it was thoroughly discussed by aristocratic philosophers at the symposiums. Upon the recognition of over-indulgence, Socrates gave advice to Charmides that self control would heal his hangover by drinking in control.<sup>24</sup> Symposiums usually follow the policy of *Stages of Drunkenness* and the bowls mentioned are actually colossal kratars in which each kratar is capable of giving all members of the symposium a drink, "Three bowls only do I mix for the temperate — one to health, which they empty first, the second to love and pleasure, the third to sleep. When this is drunk up wise guests go home. The fourth bowl is ours no longer, but belongs to violence,"<sup>25</sup> but the three bowl limit often was

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<sup>22</sup> Rosso, “Beer and Wine in Antiquity: Beneficial Remedy or Punishment Imposed by the Gods?” pp. 248.

<sup>23</sup> Plato (translated by Walter Hamilton), *The Symposium*, (Penguin Classics, 1951), pp. 38.

<sup>24</sup> Plato: *Charmides*, Complete Works, edd. John Cooper & D. S. Hutchinson (Hackett 1997); paraphrase and selections with modifications by DSH.

<sup>25</sup> Eubulus fr. 94 (stages of drunkenness) from Athenaeus *Deipnosophists* 2.36.bc

not always recognized, despite its consequences.<sup>26</sup> One of the consequences from drinking over three kratars, one who does not have self control, is found in the *Odyssey* when the one eyed monster, Cyclops tries to eat Odysseus' fleet, "here, Cyclops! You have eaten human meat; now drink some wine...he took and drank the sweet and delicious wine; he loved it, and demanded more... so I gave him another cup of wine, and then two more. He drank them all, unwisely... in drunken heaviness, he spewed wine from his throat, and chunks of human flesh."<sup>27</sup>

Described above are cases of controlled drinking, and the consequences of uncontrolled drinking. Now how was alcohol viewed as beneficial in Greece and Rome, in similar ways to their barbarian counterparts or perhaps as a society of Cyclopes? Alcohol in Mesopotamia and China influenced agriculture, agriculture to civilization, civilizations to taverns, taverns to drinking, drinking to religion, and religion to state. This seems to be the formula upon the creation of the state, and Rome and Greece are no exception, especially with the case of Dionysus or Bacchus, best known as the God of Wine, "where there is no wine, there is no love."<sup>28</sup> In the *Bacchae*, a cult of Dionysus followers rebel against King Pentheus who undermines the God of Wine. The cult, including King Penthesus' mother, slaughters King Penthesus for disrespecting Dionysus and his customs. Thanks to believing alcohol served supernatural properties, and not necessarily believing in ethanol, the drunken cult achieves ritual madness brought on by Dionysus' blood, and not drunkenness by alcohol.<sup>29</sup> State formation is therefore established in worship of Dionysus. Rebellion is served and the drinkers overthrow the statehood of Penthesus.

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<sup>26</sup> Curry, Andrew, "Our 9000 Love Affair With Booze," *National Geographic*, 2017, <https://www.dramshopexpert.com/our-9000-year-love-affair-with-booze/>

<sup>27</sup> Homer (translated by Emily Wilson), *The Odyssey*, (W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. 2018) pp. 251

<sup>28</sup> Euripides (translated by John Davie), *Bacchae*, (Penguin Classics, 2005), pp. 147

<sup>29</sup> Rosso, "Beer and Wine in Antiquity: Beneficial Remedy or Punishment Imposed by the Gods?" pp. 247

In another one of Plato writings, *Laws* points out, “shall we not pass a law that, in the first place, no children under eighteen may touch wine at all...but when a man has reached the age of forty...he may join and invoke Dionysus...that thereby we men may renew our youth.”<sup>30</sup> When a man reaches a certain age, this idea of invoking a Dionysus spirit, or youthful spirit from drinking is the ultimate goal of participants at a symposium, Dionysus cult or merely wine drinkers in Rome and Greece. People tend to decline in creativity as they age, and become more rational oriented than magical, but when alcohol is involved, it brings them back to their youthful state. That is because the prefrontal cortex grows and takes over, which is the responsible, selfish and prophetic future orientated Apollo spirit.<sup>31</sup> Wine therefore zaps the prefrontal cortex to make friends with Dionysus, which is the playful, creative, emotional and trusting spirit.<sup>32</sup> Since alcohol is friends with Dionysus, coffee and nicotine are friends with Apollo. Both of these spirits are necessary for human success, but the Dionysus spirit is what makes humans particularly distinctive from other animals. While chimpanzees hunt, gather and oftentimes attack their own kin, human survival depends on communal and creative cooperation.<sup>33</sup>

Another component of being able to step out of the animalistic and selfish spirit of Apollo is the liberation of the ego. To cease being oneself sets the individual free. With no concept of self or ego, the sense of individual responsibility is abolished and therefore the drunk sees everyone as the same and equal, which includes all people regardless of class or identity, and subsequently creates a sense of communal harmony.<sup>34</sup> As Seneca says, “the mind cannot use lofty language unless it is excited,”<sup>35</sup> and with the help of alcohol breaking any barriers of the

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<sup>30</sup> Plato *Laws* 666a–c (regulating drinking by age)

<sup>31</sup> Slingerland, Edward, *Drunk: How We Sipped, Danced and Stumbled Our Way to Civilization*, (Little, Brown Spark, 2021), pp. 64.

<sup>32</sup> Slingerland, *Drunk: How We Sipped, Danced and Stumbled Our Way to Civilization*, pp. 84.

<sup>33</sup> Slingerland, *Drunk: How We Sipped, Danced and Stumbled Our Way to Civilization*, pp. 54.

<sup>34</sup> Dodds, E.R, “The Blessings of Madness,” *University of California Press*, 1951, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/jj.8501105.6>

<sup>35</sup> Seneca *De Tranquillitate* 17 (virtues of intoxication)

ego while achieving the ecstatic present-oriented spirit of Dionysus, this form of divine madness can be acquired, “sometimes it is pleasant to be mad... Plato wrote poetry without success when he was sober.”<sup>36</sup>

Seneca puts emphasis that one should not do it often, since too much madness can lead to evils, but in small doses it is a blessing, and man should cast himself into dull sobriety for a while before becoming rejuvenated by madness again.<sup>37</sup> A Spanish Rabbi, Maimonides who wrote *Medical Aphorisms*, also recognized the virtues of self-control, along with the medical properties of alcohol, “wine is best of all medicines; good for human heart; blood movement; but only in moderation.”<sup>38</sup> Given the praise of alcohol viewed by the ancients, it should be considered if alcohol could truly give a person medical and spiritual benefits, “to be healthy is the best thing in life,” Simonides.<sup>39</sup> And if a little alcohol under the condition that it is used with self-control and moderation, and not like a Cyclops barbarian, it could be healthy. Alcohol is like a hand-grenade for the reasons that it is stimulating, depressing and mood altering all in one, and really it is the perfect drug,<sup>40</sup> but is it healthy? Huxley points out that, “most men and women lead lives...at the best so monotonous...for unrestricted use the west permitted only alcohol and tobacco...the urge to escape from selfhood and the environment is in almost everyone all the time...in spite of the hundreds of thousands killed by drunk drivers...and evidence linking cigarettes with lung cancer,” Huxley then suggests LSD or mushrooms as an alternative, “unlike alcohol it does not drive the taker into the kind of action which results in brawls, crimes and traffic accidents...and does not have to be paid for by a compensatory hangover.”<sup>41</sup> The author of

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<sup>36</sup> Seneca *De Tranquillitate* 17 (virtues of intoxication)

<sup>37</sup> Seneca *De Tranquillitate* 17 (virtues of intoxication)

<sup>38</sup> Rosso, “Beer and Wine in Antiquity: Beneficial Remedy or Punishment Imposed by the Gods?” pp. 255.

<sup>39</sup> Perrottet, Tony, *The Naked Olympics: The True Story of the Ancient Games*, (Hopkins & Company, 2004), pp. 18.

<sup>40</sup> Slingerland, *Drunk: How We Sipped, Danced and Stumbled Our Way to Civilization*, pp.79.

<sup>41</sup> Huxley, Aldous, *The Doors of Perception*, (Harper Perennial, 1956), pp. 62-67.

*The Doors* does not specify alcohol taken with self-control and moderation, but only the consequences like an individual who breaks Plato's *Laws* of going over the three kratar limit and taking on the spirit of Cyclops, not Dionysus. Alcohol for health today shows that in moderation it can lead to longevity by reducing stress, as Maimonides points out wine is good for blood movement, and since cardiovascular disease is known as the number one killer, it is usually caused by stress.<sup>42</sup>

The culture of drinking in China, Mesopotamia and Greece all simultaneously have beliefs that alcohol is supernatural, and that religion yields to create a state caused by drinking culture. The effects of alcohol that were worshiped are creative spontaneousness, openness and playful flexibility, which are traits associated with youth. Dangers of alcohol were recognized by China and Rome, but Mesopotamia were still drinking ten pints a day, which the Romans and Greeks wrote about the consequences of this barbaric behavior with the likes of *Laws*, *Stages of Drunkenness* and the Cyclops scene. Hemingway said, "wine is one of the most civilized things in the world."<sup>43</sup> Now could that be true in alcohol being responsible for establishing the first agriculture, state, writing, currency, while also diminishing the ego to promote social creativity and reduce stress for longevity under the condition of using in moderation?

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<sup>42</sup> Bernstein, Adam, "Alcohol and Health: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly," *Healthline*, 2023, <https://www.healthline.com/nutrition/alcohol-good-or-bad>

<sup>43</sup> Hemingway, Ernest, *Death in the Afternoon*, (Harper Perennial, 2012), pp. 6.

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