Alcohol: A History by Rod Phillips (review)

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This richly textured and informative treatise on humankind’s “love affair” with alcoholic beverages through the millennia expands upon Phillips’ A Short History of Wine (New York, 2001), following a similar chronological format. Phillips focuses on the past 500 years (nearly three-quarters of the book), showing how Europe’s relationship to alcoholic beverages and regulations for their use/abuse have evolved and spread to other parts of the world. Contrary to what one might expect from the title of the book and the goal of providing a “global” history (5), the rich panoply of alcoholic beverages in Africa, Asia, Polynesia, the Americas, etc. are largely viewed, as it were, through a “European lens.”

Although Phillips sets the fascinating and far-flung dimensions of alcohol and fermentation within a larger biological and hominid context (6–7), he could have taken greater advantage of interdisciplinary findings. For example, he does not mention that astrophysicists using microwave and far-infrared-frequency telescopes have recently detected massive clouds of ethyl and other alcohols in the star-forming regions at the center of the Milky Way, with significant implications for the beginning of life on earth.1 He might have stressed that anaerobic fermentation or glycolysis is probably the earliest energy system on the planet, dating back 4 billion years. The availability of a kind of “carbonated, alcoholic beverage,” even before water, might explain why many animals, ranging from fruit flies to elephants, share many of the same genes and physiologies as humans for sensing and metabolizing alcohol (about 10 percent of the enzymes in our livers serve to metabolize alcohol into energy). The enjoyment that most animals, including humans, derive from alcohol is a result of a “pleasure cascade” of neurotransmitters in their brain, and the unpleasant effects of over-indulgence (including loss of coordination, followed by sedation and finally paralysis or worse) are not confined to humans. In light of such considerations, is it any wonder that the consumption of alcoholic beverages, which is literally in “our genes,” is no easier to prevent through legislation than is, say, sugar?

The modern-Eurocentric approach of the book, informed by recent prohibition movements, probably contributes to Phillips’ largely negative approach to alcoholic beverages. Although he recognizes alcohol’s positive aspects—religious, social, medical, economic, etc.—he devotes most of his attention to such deleterious effects as the “gin-craze” of early eighteenth-century England or the drunken behavior of native peoples in the Americas and Africa (124–130, 149–150, 217–218). A more positive view would recognize the human ingenuity responsible for the discovery of how to make fermented beverages and how they have been incorporated into numerous cultures around the world from prehistory up

1 For much of what follows, see McGovern, Uncorking the Past: The Quest for Wine, Beer, and Other Alcoholic Beverages (Berkeley, 2009).
to the present. For example, today’s African cultures are awash in sorghum and millet beers, honey mead, and banana and palm wines. Their ancient precedents, possibly extending back to the beginning of our species some 100,000 years ago, formed the social and religious core of countless “alcohol cultures” throughout the continent. They comprise the neglected part of a story obscured by European drinks, customs, and regulations. Similarly, in the Americas, ancient humans discovered how to make alcoholic beverage from a host of previously unknown fruits, cacti, and carbohydrate resources, which became central to everyday life, ceremonial activities, major public events, and the economies of numerous native peoples. Preeminent was a fermented chocolate beverage that Phillips does not mention. The same points apply to East Asia and Europe, beyond Greece and Rome.

A number of misconceptions have crept into Phillips’ otherwise interesting and accurate history. The earliest alcoholic beverages of humankind probably derived from the mastication of carbohydrate resources (wild grains, tubers, grasses, etc.), in addition to the collection of ripe fruit and honey and their natural fermentation to wine and mead because of associated yeast (10). Human saliva contains enzymes which readily transform carbohydrates into sugars; the resulting sweet expectorated liquid attracts insects who inoculate it with yeast and produce a beer. For example, numerous quids of masticated agave, sotol (a desert plant), yucca, bulrush, and maize, which were excavated in caves of central and southern Mexico dating back 10,000 years, imply that this method was used for making alcoholic beverages. Turning to later periods, the earliest chemically attested fermented beverage at Jiahu in China, c. 7000 B.C., was not a “wine” per se but a mixed or hybrid beverage made from fruits, cereal, and honey (12). It was thus a combination, wine-beer-mead. Its rice was not broken down by a specialized fungal preparation, which the Chinese uniquely developed for brewing thousands of years later, but most likely by masticating and/or sprouting the grain to make a malt. Fermented beverages, preserved as liquids, date no earlier than c. 1600–1046 B.C. in China; bronze vessels of the Shang Dynasty provide the earliest evidence. No pottery vessels were chemically confirmed to contain barley beer at Hajji Firuz Tepe in Iran (14); they were recovered from Godin Tepe, dating some 2,000 years later. Australia has many suitable fruits (wild plums, guandong, et al.), carbohydrate resources (bottlebrush and banksia flowers), and honey for fermentation (15).

The first long-distance wine trade identified thus far involved exportation from the southern Levant to Abydos on the middle Nile River in Egypt, c. 3150 B.C., not along the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in the early second millennium B.C. (18). Wine did not have more religious associations than beer in ancient Egypt (19, 21). The Canaanites and Phoenicians from the eastern Mediterranean, traveling in the first sea-going ships made of cedar of Lebanon, preceded Greece in establishing the earliest international trade routes for wine and other commodities (27).
Phillips’ discussions of later premodern peoples (including Israelites, Greeks, and Romans) are generally well-informed, but several instances could stand correction. For example, no Hebrew or Greek words in the Bible appear to be translatable as “beer,” and Yahweh did not consume two liters of beer per day (49). Beer was likely made by both Minoans and Mycenaeans (25–26, 46), and incorporated into a mixed fermented beverage that included grape wine and honey mead, similar to Homer’s kykeon. Greece and Rome did not develop alcohol cultures that were more elaborate than those of Asia and the Americas (44).

A more engaging writing style would have been more appropriate for a subject that has fascinated humans, both positively and negatively, for so long. For example, masses of tax and demographic data about alcoholic production and consumption, which Phillips uses to buttress his “key theme”—the widespread governmental regulation of alcoholic beverages (2–3)—are frequently dismissed as inadequate because of their failure to provide a firm basis for drawing conclusions (321). If so, how can he conclude that we have entered a “post-alcohol era,” especially when the worlds of craft beer, cocktail innovation, mead making, etc. are enjoying revivals around the world?

Several additional references, which are more recent or provide further documentation, are missing from this book. Interested readers should also consult Robert Dudley, The Drunken Monkey: Why We Drink and Abuse Alcohol (Berkeley, 2014); McGovern et al., “Fermented Beverages of Pre- and Proto-Historic China,” Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences USA, CI (2004), 17593–17598; Hans Barnard et al., “Chemical Evidence for Wine Production Around 4000 BCE in the Late Chalcolithic Near Eastern Highlands,” Journal of Archaeological Science, XXXVIII (2010), 977–984.

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Is religion a uniquely, or even particularly, problematical subject for historians, as is argued by the editors of this collection of papers? Questions of objectivity and the role of the personal opinions and commitments have occupied the discipline of history for decades, as has the challenge of the rhetorical and narratological turns. Indeed, this volume would seem to indicate, if only through its title, that religious historians are finally catching up with the rest of the profession.

Notwithstanding that such problems and issues are the same for every scholar who studies the past, historians of religion may well experience them in a more acute form. Because followers of most of