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poured at the end of the day, quietly surrendering its scents and stories—we know no other moment quite like this. Daylight is going or gone and, with it, the obligation to work, to act, and to analyze; that glass marks the gateway to ease, imagination, and emotion, all of them proper to darkness and a fitting prelude to sleep. The wine nuances our lived experience, bringing both perspective and chiaroscuro. At times, indeed, it can seem to furnish a kind of spiritual nourishment. Our involvement with it triggers a cascade of sensual delight but, for any reader of this journal, much more than that, too: The wine will have been chosen with care and perhaps stored for some years; it will come laden with biography and pregnant with expectation. Those expectations will then be dashed, matched, or exceeded by its performance in nose and mouth. This sensual delight, in other words, is richly invested.
The consumption of an alcoholic beverage by candlelight or firelight is one of the few intimate daily acts we share with those who have gone before us; it may be the most culturally rich of these. But how far before? Shakespeare’s Falstaff, alone in the forest, hymning sack; the Chinese poet Li Po, watching snowflakes melt into his wine; Homer’s Odysseus and his sailors, fortifying themselves with the “plentiful supply of meat, and sparkling ruddy wine” provided by Circe before braving Scylla and Charybdis. Literature provides us with a few delicious fragments—but then we lose the trace.

Traces have furnished a life’s work for Patrick McGovern, scientific director of the Biomolecular Archaeology Laboratory for Cuisine, Fermented Beverages, and Health at the University of Pennsylvania Museum; his project is to piece together the “before.” “What do you do?” I asked him, in one of two interviews conducted in October 2017 and February 2018 for this piece. “I am a combination chemist and archaeologist,” he replied. “The general idea is to recover the ancient organic compounds that were contained within certain vessels and find out what they were.” But as his books (notably Uncorking The Past: The Quest for Wine, Beer and Other Alcoholic Beverages, hereafter UP, published by University of California Press in 2009) make clear, in synthesizing both his own work and that of others, he suggests something dramatic and radical: that man is Homo imbibens, driven by biological, social, and religious imperatives to consume alcohol, and that this relationship with alcohol is a key to “understanding the development of our species and its cultures.”

From murex to mead

The most recent common ancestor of all extant hominid genera (Homo, Pongo, Paranthropus, and Ardipithecus), the most recent common ancestor of all extant hominid genera. The most recent common ancestor of all extant hominid genera (Homo, Pongo, Paranthropus, and Ardipithecus), the most recent common ancestor of all extant hominid genera. The most recent common ancestor of all extant hominid genera (Homo, Pongo, Paranthropus, and Ardipithecus), the most recent common ancestor of all extant hominid genera. The most recent common ancestor of all extant hominid genera (Homo, Pongo, Paranthropus, and Ardipithecus), the most recent common ancestor of all extant hominid genera. The most recent common ancestor of all extant hominid genera (Homo, Pongo, Paranthropus, and Ardipithecus), the most recent common ancestor of all extant hominid genera. The most recent common ancestor of all extant hominid genera. The most recent common ancestor of all extant hominid genera.
“We’re really set up,” says McGovern, “to drink an alcohol beverage.” When, I asked, might intentionality have begun in this process? “I see it as being way back into the higher primates era,” he replied, contending that our intimacy with alcohol is not only as old as we are as a species but was a trait acquired by our monkey or primate ancestors—though we have no way of proving this at present.

**Flute music at dusk**

Let’s now switch to what we do know. Jiahu was a substantial (5.5ha [13.5-acre]) Neolithic settlement surrounded by a moat and settled by between 250 and 800 people between 7,000 BCE and 5,700 BCE, when it was destroyed in a flood. So far, 45 residences have been excavated and nine pottery kilns found; analysis of the skeletal remains reveals that Jiahu inhabitants experienced improving health and longevity over the life of the settlement. They farmed millet and rice; they raised pigs, dogs, poultry, and cattle (using pig and cattle manure to raise rice yields); they gathered and foraged wild pears, apricots, chestnuts, broad beans, and soya beans; they fished for carp and hunted wild boar, deer, and rabbits. And come the end of the day, they drank alcohol.

Made from what, and in what form? One of the big surprises of McGovern’s work is that the pure forms of alcoholic beverages with which we are familiar today are exceedingly rare in the distant past. Analyses of the Jiahu residues (16 sherds) consistently revealed mixtures that included tartaric acid (derived from a native wild grape and/or hawthorn fruit) and maltose (possibly both) mingled with meal and rice beer. The beverage was likely to have been drunk from a communal vessel of some sort using straws to avoid floating debris, or so later traditions suggest. This drink, at least for the time being, is the first ancestor of Romanée-Conti and Montrachet, of Haut-Brion and Petrus.

That’s not all, though. Jiahu has its own symbols—possibly pictograms since their similarity to later Chinese characters is striking; in that case they are a form of proto-writing. Nine were found on tortoise shells (used, in later Chinese culture, for divination) and two on bone. Even more movingly, Jiahu is celebrated for its 33 flutes (20 of them intact), all of them made from the wing bones of the red-crowned crane, a presently endangered species celebrated for its beautiful mating dance and a Taoist symbol of longevity and immortality. McGovern sees this as “the first glimmerings of a shamanistic cult adapted to the new circumstances of the Chinese Neolithic Revolution” (JP, p.40), which may well be the case; see below for more on his theories of the shaman. More simply, though, these silent
remains, and the Jaula evenings they invoke, must seem plangent to those of us alive in the 21st century who have loved wine, as a gateway to poetry, to dance, and to an appreciation of the natural world.

Residue riches

Jauja is just one of a number of Chinese Neolithic sites currently being excavated, indeed McGovern has even examined and analyzed a liquid sample from Yinxu (‘the ruins of Yin’) in Anyang, a Shang dynasty capital city also in Henan province, dating back 2,500 years. It had been hermetically sealed by the very tight fit of the lid of this bronze vessel, which was perforated to around one-quarter of its original volume, and the vessel was eventually totally sealed by corrosion. It still retained a sensorial profile: ‘It had the characteristic fragrance of fine rice or millet wine made the traditional way, or Anasazi [a pre-Columbian Ancestral Puebloan] style. Interestingly, the six jars in the kitchen of one ordinary house are any more interesting; drinking in the village was not a privilege of only the rich and famous.’

Finding the cradle

This in turn leads us to one of the most vexed questions of all in McGovern’s field—and one on which he is constantly called to pronounce: ‘Which country can lay claim to being “the cradle of wine”? It is, in a way, an absurd question. But for a plant with the vine’s cultural significance, the claim matters and is immensely significant to modern nation states eventually revealed not only that they contained wine flavored with a tree resin, but that they had probably also had clay stoppers to conserve their liquid contents. McGovern and his colleagues were surprised by their discovery. ‘If, the six jars in the kitchen of an ordinary house are...any more interesting; drinking in the village was not a privilege of only the rich and famous.’

Toasting Midas

Other residues analyzed by McGovern and colleagues from the Caucasus, Anatolia, and the Near East include those from the significant sites of Godin Tepe (in the central Zagros Mountains of western Iran, south of Haji Firuz) and Gordon (on the central Anatolian plateau close to present-day Ankara), though both of these sites are more recent than the Georgian finds. ‘(The Eurasian grape), it seems likely that the vine that wine lovers continue to treasure today, Vitis vinifera sp. vinifera (the European grape), was first domesticated in this part of the world, by women, at a point in time, that of all the rival national entities trying to wrestle the archaeological crown from each other we are undoubtedly impressed by the first tribal Canaanite or Anatolian vine tenders, setting about their work on rampant vine domestication, without the involvement of men. Whatever significance is attached to the domestication of this species, however, we might wish to celebrate the achievement in the context of the changing political landscape in this region, rather than being dated to the 7th or 8th millennium BE.’

The excavation of the “Midas mound” was carried out by the Penn Museum in 1915. The tomb itself was opened and the riches within revealed in a moment of excitement similar to that of Howard Carter’s 1922 opening of Tutankhamun’s burial chamber. “When excavators broke through the wall of the tomb in 1915, they came face to face with [...] the body of a sixty-to-sixty-five-year-old male, laid out on a thick pile of blue and purple textiles, the colors of regal splendor. In the background gleamed the largest Iron Age drinking set ever found: 175 bronze vessels, including vats, jars, and drinking bowls, which were used in a dinner-bidding farewell to the tomb’s occupant”.

The discovery of a treasured liquid, whether Midas himself or his father Gordias—suggested a recipe: “When excavators broke through the wall of the tomb in 1915, they came face to face with [...] the body of a sixty-to-sixty-five-year-old male, laid out on a thick pile of blue and purple textiles, the colors of regal splendor. In the background gleamed the largest Iron Age drinking set ever found: 175 bronze vessels, including vats, jars, and drinking bowls, which were used in a dinner-bidding farewell to the tomb’s occupant”.

A final fascinating analysis of pottery residues undertaken by McGovern and his colleagues is that of the tomb of the early Egyptian king Scorpion I, who died around 5,000 years ago (approximately 3,500 BCE)—an event roughly contemporaneous with the building of the first Egyptian pyramid. Three rooms in Scorpion’s tomb at Meidum, downstream from Luxor, were stacked with wine jars—some 700 Altogether, amounting to around 4,500 liters of wine, underlining the high status of what was certainly an imported beverage at the time. Vineyards did grow (though it is likely they were imported vines, points to barley beer. This period was the beginning of urbanism and the rise of the cities, of the first civilization, you could say, it was characterized by a lot of specialized activities, in lower Mesopotamia, down in the Tigris-Euphrates valley. That was where they could produce a lot of grain, which was very important for beer, but if they wanted wine, that would have taken quite a bit of labor. As Robin, the vine thrives, up in the Zagros Mountains.” One feature of Godin Tepe was the way that the wine jars had been laid on their sides so as to keep their clay stoppers moist inside narrow mouths and so prevent the contents from acceleration, suggesting a process of maturation that might have lasted several years. The jars containing beer, by contrast, were wider-mouthed, suggesting more rapid consumption using straws, a scene often duplicated in pictorial form on Mesopotamian cylinder seals. Gordian or Gordium (modern Yassiluhuk) was the capital of the kingdom of Gordius, located in the southeastern part of the ancient kingdom in Asia Minor between about 1,200 BCE and 700 BCE. According to The Iliad, they fought alongside the Trojans against the Achaeans. The excavation of the Godin Tepe site contained 64 samples of residues which were analyzed for grapevines and viticulture from the Near East. As for the grapevine and viticulture from the Near East. The key lies in a characteristic single characteristic... However, from the analysis of the remains, it is clear that the grapevine and viticulture from the Near East were abundant. Moreover, the Neolithic period is characterized by a significant expansion of human populations, and the grapevine and viticulture from the Near East were an important component of this expansion. As a result, the grapevine and viticulture from the Near East gained prominence, and spread throughout the region. Additionally, the grapevine and viticulture from the Near East were an important component of the economic system, and the grapevine and viticulture from the Near East were an important component of the social and cultural system. As a result, the grapevine and viticulture from the Near East gained prominence, and spread throughout the region. Additionally, the grapevine and viticulture from the Near East were an important component of the economic system, and the grapevine and viticulture from the Near East were an important component of the social and cultural system.

Analysis of the residues inside Scorpion’s jars brought some fascinating results. All were, as so often in the ancient world,
The necessity for alcohol

In addition to his work with Niasians, McGovern also provides (notably in Uncorking the Past) a comprehensive overview of the astonishingly creative ways in which humans in different global locations and cultures have been able to produce alcoholic beverages. This account of raw materials, ways and means, via the archaeological record, goes some way to substantiate his theory that Homo sapiens sapiens might also be considered Homo imbibens. His overall suggestion is that alcoholic beverages became, from the earliest years of human cultural development, emotionally, religiously, and intellectually necessary to human health in the same way that food staples were physically necessary to human health; moreover, alcoholic beverages occupied, until relatively recently, a privileged place both as a medicine in its own right and as a means for preserving and ingesting medical plants, herbs, and roots. The big challenge for those producing alcoholic beverages at all times and in all locations was that of having raw materials containing suitable levels of fermentable sugars; the fact that Vitis vinifera the Eurasian grape, once a juice has been expressed, is the perfect nutritional medium for native yeast to become active might also be the key to the wine grape’s preeminence. Mc Govern considers it most likely that alcoholic beverages became, from the earliest years of human cultural development, emotionally, religiously, and intellectually necessary to human health in the same way that food staples were physically necessary to human health; moreover, alcoholic beverages occupied, until relatively recently, a privileged place both as a medicine in its own right and as a means for preserving and ingesting medical plants, herbs, and roots.

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From silverback to Parker

One idea that McGovern constantly returns to in his work is that of the shaman. "Wherever art and artifacts have survived, they support the idea that the preparation and use of fermented beverages during the Paleolithic period was focused on an authority figure, the 'shaman' who oversaw a community's religious and social needs. Even in this early period, tight bonds must have existed between fermented beverages, religion, music, dance, and art." (UP, p.408). When we spoke in February 2018, he said he saw this "as going back to the higher primates again, the silverback, the alpha male we spoke in February 2018, he said he saw this "as going back to the Paleolithic period, tight bonds must have existed between fermented beverages, religion, music, dance, and art" (UP, p.408). When we spoke in February 2018, he said he saw this "as going back to the Paleolithic period, tight bonds must have existed between fermented beverages, religion, music, dance, and art" (UP, p.408).

So, are the efforts that are poured into encouraging and enforcing abstention, whether from doctors or clerics, ultimately doomed? "I think so! Ultimately, humans will always come back to it. They have an urge to drink alcohol. Though I would also say that moderate consumption is what we are adapted to, and that also probably goes back to the Paleolithic period. Alcohol is so readily available now that people overdo it. But that doesn't mean you have to ignore its positive effects".

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