Contents

BOOKS

Patrick E McGovern

Uncorking the Past: The Quest for Wine, Beer, and Other Alcoholic Beverages

Published by University of California Press; $29.95/£20.95

Reviewed by Stuart Walton

At the center of the Milky Way, around 26,000 light years from the Earth, there is a vast belt, measuring many billions of miles across, of pure booze. It is composed of methanol, vinyl ethanol, and—the sort humans have grown to like—straight ethanol, drifting about in clouds and forming around new star systems. It has been conjectured that its molecules—those of vinyl ethanol in particular, with their gregarious tendency to bond—might have formed into clumps of dust particles that were carried across the primeval interstellar wastes on the heads of comets, before being accidentally spilled on our own planet. There, they germinated into the earliest microscopic biota. In turn, these evolved into the rich diversity of organic life forms of which the human species represents the pinnacle. It's been happy hour ever since.

With this astonishing preamble, Patrick McGovern opens one of the most richly rewarding contributions to the scientific and cultural study of intoxicants to have appeared in the past two decades. This discipline, to which I gave the name "intoxicology" in a study of 2001, represents the attempt to situate the discovery, elaboration, and customary uses of mind-altering substances within the evolutionary history of humanity and other species. The focus of the present work is on alcohol, specifically on fermented drinks (distillation is another story), but in key passages, McGovern links the development of specialized drinks in different parts of the world to the use of psychotropic plants, with which they have so often developed in symbiosis. Indeed, one of the newest aspects of the archeological findings has lain in uncovering how often and how widely both types of psychoactive substances were combined, the fermented drink carrying and potentiating the impact of hallucinogens.

In a very real evolutionary sense, we were "driven to drink," as McGovern puts it, in Paleolithic times. Whether that was because we all primordially owe our existence to the alcoholic haze floating about in the middle of our universe has to be moot for now, but that bravura overture to *Uncorking the Past* is the biggest speculative step it asks its readers to take. After that, the rest is theoretical child's play.

This fascinating book builds on the work of the previous generation of researchers in the field, among them Ronald K Siegel and Andrew Weil, who were the first to posit that the urge to intoxication is a primary drive among many species, but most of all humans. All the archeobotanical evidence uncovered, up to the most recent gleanings, supports the strengthening hypothesis that the impulse to domesticate certain cereals and fruits in the Stone Age was driven by their suitability for fermentation. In the case of cereal grains, we might legitimately wonder whether bread or beer was what our ancestors were after. With fermentable fruits, such as figs, dates and the Eurasian wine grape, there can surely be no question. Even before either of these classes of ingredients came into play, a readily fermentable material lay to hand in an undomesticated state in the form of honey, one of the richest and simplest sugar sources in nature.

McGovern persuasively favors what has become known as the Paleolithic hypothesis on the discovery of alcohol, which posits that at some stage in humanity's ancestry, a fermented mass of something like honey (others have suggested palm sap) would have been encountered, perhaps quietly bubbling away in a beehive in the hollow of a fallen tree. Its first ingestion, whether deliberate or accidental, literally changed the world and would rapidly have passed between members of a tight-knit nomadic group. It would at first have been only a seasonal treat, before strategies were devised to store it and then to produce it year round.

The uses of intoxicants have since been all but limitless. They have played and continue to play a ceremonial or sacramental role in many religious observances. They have likely been medicinal since before the historical record begins. They have stimulated, if not always enhanced, the creative impulse. And they are, of course, one of the preeminent material factors in making our lives livable. The abjuration of alcohol and other intoxicants, within certain religious jurisdictions and in the legislative apparatus of the past century, is nothing more than a tiny cultural anomaly in the age-long human romance with altered consciousness.

This general thesis has been in the intellectual ether at least since the work of Siegel in the 1980s, but the puzzle pieces to fill out the picture are still being fitted into place. What is new about McGovern's work is that it painstakingly presents evidence from around the globe for the very earliest development of fermented alcohol drinks in widely divergent and geographically far-flung societies. And there are still surprises in store.

Our best evidence for the origins of grape wine has traditionally put it securely in the Near East, on the western fringes of Asia. Excavations at Jiahu in Henan province in north-central China, in which the author has been closely involved, have uncovered several intact earthenware jars, strikingly similar in design to the wine amphorae in use on the other side of Asia in Canaanite and Phoenician times. Chemical analysis of the internal residues in the jars indicate the presence of the trinity of ancient fermentable materials: grain (in the

form of rice), honey, and fruit (indicated by the presence of tartaric acid and its salts). The jars can be dated to around 7000 BC. Is the discovery of grape fermentation yet another preemptive achievement to be chalked up to Chinese ingenuity?

Even if the fruit residues at Jiahu do turn out to be of grapes, we know that systematic cultivation of the Eurasian grapevine only started in western Asia somewhat later. What is quite as interesting about these findings is the further evidence they furnish that the mixing of fruit and grain intoxicants was widely practiced in Neolithic times. One possible reason for this was that the wild yeasts readily present in fruit were a surer way of initiating the fermentation of a cereal-based brew. Maybe the fruit additives represented the starter culture for the drink in many regions. However that may be, the earliest societies to practice the storage, aging, and connoisseurial appreciation of fermented drinks had already begun to treat them in a distinctly less slapdash manner. Additives now more likely played the role of preservatives, such as various tree resins, wormwood, and herbal preparations.

The vessels at Jiahu are the earliest evidence yet found of an alcoholic drink in antiquity. That doesn't mean that they won't be superseded by findings in the fecund archeological sites of eastern Turkey, such as Çatal Höyük, from which microbiological results were tantalizingly still awaited when *Uncorking the Past* went to press. What is predominantly missing so far is firmer evidence of the probable routes of transmission that fermentation technologies took from one side of Asia to the other. The ancient pictograms for wine and beer from the respective zones—*jiu* in Chinese, *kaş* in proto-Sumerian—are almost identical.

Not the least compelling evidence for the continuities in alcohol development globally is that so many of its uses are common to societies all over. The symbolic use of intoxication is one obvious candidate, but even consumption methods, such as the widespread folk practice of drinking communally from a shared vessel by means of individual tubes or straws, is another, even more suggestive one. The habit has its origin in antiquity—where it is depicted in Mesopotamian tomb carvings and African rock art, for example—and represents the simplest way of bypassing the floating fermentation residues and getting at the good clear alcohol underneath.

At least some of this continuity can be attributed to what McGovern identifies as the innate conservatism of intoxication cultures. Once established, they have no reason to change much, other than in the general directions of hygiene and, often, greater efficacy (as witness the eventual development of distillation). Much of the *longue durée* of alcohol in human affairs has been sustained by religion. Investigations in the hypothalamus of the human brain, conducted among lucky Tibetan monks and Catholic nuns, has demonstrated the catalytic effect of alcohol on the neural processes that trigger spiritual states, right up to the celebrated impression of oneness with the world that religious adepts of many persuasions claim.

Oneness with the world, it seems, is caused when the ordinary functioning of the right posterior inferior parietal lobule (just behind your right ear) is altered by alcohol. Those not of this proclivity may settle for the wisdom of Otimo no Tabito, an 8th-century Japanese poet who declares, in his lyric suite *Thirteen Songs in Praise of Wine*, that "Sitting silent and looking wise / Cannot be compared to / Drinking sake / And making a racket."

McGovern's superb book possesses the appropriately giddying sense throughout of a mass of research being potently concentrated into a heady but digestible final product. Given that much of the presentation relies on hard science, it is surprisingly accessibly written (even for those who wish we could just call a drink a drink now and then, rather than a beverage). Like the best such work, it positively invites collaborative speculation, and it's helpfully laced with a scattering of entertaining asides. I'm glad I didn't have to share a nightly table in Lebanon in 1974 with an expedition director who forbade colleagues' wives from attending dinner and would only let you drink when he'd started. It isn't only the urban teenager who can behave like a doofus under the influence.