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Civilized Beer

Pleasure—it is beer. Discomfort—it is an expedition.

—*Mesopotamian proverb, c. 2000 BCE*

The mouth of a perfectly contented man is filled with beer.

—*Egyptian proverb, c. 2200 BCE*

The Urban Revolution

THE WORLD'S FIRST cities arose in Mesopotamia, "the land between the streams," the name given to the area between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers that roughly corresponds to modern Iraq. Most of the inhabitants of these cities were farmers, who lived within the city walls and walked out to tend their fields each morning. Administrators and craftsmen who did not work in the fields were the earliest humans to live entirely urban lives. Wheeled vehicles trundled through the matrix of city streets; people bought and sold goods in bustling marketplaces. Religious ceremonies and public holidays passed by in a reassuringly regular cycle. Even the proverbs of the time have a familiar world-weariness, as this

example shows: "He who possesses much silver may be happy; he who possesses much barley may be happy; but he who has nothing at all can sleep."

Exactly why people chose to live in large cities rather than small villages remains unclear. It was probably the result of several overlapping factors: People may have wanted to be near important religious or trading centers, for example, and in the case of Mesopotamia, security may have been a significant motivation. The lack of natural boundaries—Mesopotamia is essentially a large open plain—meant the area was subject to repeated invasions and attacks. From around 4300 BCE villages began to band together, forming ever-larger towns and eventually cities, each of which sat at the center of its own system of fields and irrigation channels. By 3000 BCE the city of Uruk, the largest of its day, had a population of around fifty thousand and was surrounded by a circle of fields ten miles in radius. By 2000 BCE almost the entire population in southern Mesopotamia was living in a few dozen large city-states, including Uruk, Ur, Lagash, Eridu, and Nippur. Thereafter Egypt took the lead, and its cities, such as Memphis and Thebes, grew to become the ancient world's largest.

These two earliest examples of *civilization*—a word that simply means "living in cities"—were different in many ways. Political unification enabled Egyptian culture to endure almost unchanged for nearly three thousand years, for example, while Mesopotamia was the scene of constant political and military upheaval. But in one vital respect they were similar: Both cultures were made possible by an agricultural surplus, in particular an excess of grain. This surplus not only freed a small elite of

administrators and craftsmen from the need to produce their own food but also funded vast public works such as canals, temples, and pyramids. As well as being the logical medium of exchange, grain was the basis of the national diet in both Egypt and Mesopotamia. It was a sort of edible money, and it was consumed in both solid and liquid forms, as bread and beer.

The Drink of the Civilized Man

The recorded history of beer, and indeed of everything else, begins in Sumer, a region in southern Mesopotamia where writing first began to emerge around 3400 BCE. That beer drinking was seen as a hallmark of civilization by the Mesopotamians is particularly apparent in a passage from the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the world's first great literary work. Gilgamesh was a Sumerian king who ruled around 2700 BCE, and whose life story was subsequently embroidered into an elaborate myth by the Sumerians and their regional successors, the Akkadians and Babylonians. The story tells of Gilgamesh's adventures with his friend Enkidu, who starts off as a wild man running naked in the wilderness but is introduced to the ways of civilization by a young woman. She takes Enkidu to a shepherds' village, the first rung on the ladder toward the high culture of the city, where

*They placed food in front of him,
they placed beer in front of him;
Enkidu knew nothing about eating bread for food,
and of drinking beer he had not been taught.
The young woman 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.
He was elated and his face glowed.
He splashed his shaggy body with water,
and rubbed himself with oil, and turned into a human.*

Enkidu's primitive nature is demonstrated by his lack of familiarity with bread and beer; but once he has consumed them, and then washed himself, he too becomes a human and is then ready to go to Uruk, the city ruled by Gilgamesh. The Mesopotamians regarded the consumption of bread and beer as one of the things that distinguished them from savages and made them fully human. Interestingly, this belief seems to echo beer's association with a settled, orderly lifestyle, rather than the haphazard existence of hunter-gatherers in prehistoric times.

The possibility of drunkenness seems to have done nothing to undermine the equation of beer drinking with civilization. Most references to drunkenness in Mesopotamian literature are playful and humorous: Enkidu's initiation as a human, indeed, involved getting drunk and singing. Similarly, Sumerian myths depict the gods as very fallible, human characters who enjoy eating and drinking, and often drink too much. Their capricious behavior was blamed for the precarious and unpredictable nature of Sumerian life, in which harvests could fail and marauding armies could appear on the horizon at any moment. Sumerian religious ceremonies involved laying out a meal on a table in the temple

before a divine image, followed by a banquet at which the consumption of food and drink by the priests and worshippers invoked the presence of the gods and the spirits of the dead.

Beer was just as important in ancient Egyptian culture, where references to it go back almost as far. It is mentioned in documents from the third dynasty, which began in 2650 BCE, and several varieties of beer are mentioned in "Pyramid Texts," the funerary texts found inscribed in pyramids from the end of the fifth dynasty, around 2350 BCE. (The Egyptians developed their own form of writing shortly after the Sumerians, to record both mundane transactions and kingly exploits, but whether it was an independent development or inspired by Sumerian writing remains unclear.) One survey of Egyptian literature found that beer, the Egyptian word for which was *hek*, was mentioned more times than any other foodstuff. As in Mesopotamia, beer was thought to have ancient and mythological origins, and it appears in prayers, myths, and legends.

One Egyptian tale even credits beer with saving humankind from destruction. Ra, the sun god, learned that humankind was plotting against him, and dispatched the goddess Hathor to exact punishment. But such was her ferocity that Ra feared there would soon be nobody left to worship him, and he took pity on humankind. He prepared a vast amount of beer—seven thousand jars of it, in some versions of the story—dyed it red to resemble blood, and spread it over the fields, where it shone like a vast mirror. Hathor paused to admire her reflection and then stooped to drink some of the mixture. She became intoxicated, fell asleep, and forgot about her bloody mission. Humankind was saved, and Hathor became the goddess of beer and brew-

ing. Versions of this story have been found inscribed in the tombs of Egyptian kings, including Tutankhamen, Seti I, and Ramses the Great.

In contrast to the Mesopotamians' relaxed attitude toward intoxication, however, a strong disapproval of drunkenness was expressed in the practice texts copied out by apprentice scribes in Egypt, many of which have survived in large quantities in rubbish mounds. One passage admonishes young scribes: "Beer, it scareth men from thee, it sendeth thy soul to perdition. Thou art like a broken steering-oar in a ship, that is obedient on neither side." Another example, from a collection of advice called "The Wisdom of Ani," gives a similar warning: "Take not upon thyself to drink a jug of beer. Thou speakest, and an unintelligible utterance issueth from thy mouth." Such scribal training texts, however, are unrepresentative of Egyptian values in general. They disapprove of almost everything except endless studying in order to pursue a career as a scribe. Other texts have titles such as "Do Not Be a Soldier, Priest or Baker," "Do Not Be a Husbandman," and "Do Not Be a Charioteer."

Mesopotamians and Egyptians alike saw beer as an ancient, god-given drink that underpinned their existence, formed part of their cultural and religious identity, and had great social importance. "To make a beer hall" and "to sit in the beer hall" were popular Egyptian expressions that meant "to have a good time" or "to carouse," while the Sumerian expression a "pouring of beer" referred to a banquet or celebratory feast, and formal visits by the king to high officials' homes to receive tribute were recorded as "when the king drank beer at the house of so-and-so." In both cultures, beer was a staple food-

stuff without which no meal was complete. It was consumed by everyone, rich and poor, men and women, adults and children, from the top of the social pyramid to the bottom. It was truly the defining drink of these first great civilizations.

The Origins of Writing

The earliest written documents are Sumerian wage lists and tax receipts, in which the symbol for beer, a clay vessel with diagonal linear markings drawn inside it, is one of the most common words, along with the symbols for grain, textiles, and livestock. That is because writing was originally invented to record the collection and distribution of grain, beer, bread, and other goods. It arose as a natural extension of the Neolithic custom of using tokens to account for contributions to a communal storehouse. Indeed, Sumerian society was a logical continuation of Neolithic social structures but on a far larger scale, the culmination of thousands of years of increasing economic and cultural complexity. Just as the chieftain of a Neolithic village collected surplus food, the priests of the Sumerian cities collected surplus barley, wheat, sheep, and textiles. Officially, these goods were offerings to the gods, but in practice they were compulsory taxes that were consumed by the temple bureaucracy or traded for other goods and services. The priests could, for example, pay for the maintenance of irrigation systems and the construction of public buildings by handing out rations of bread and beer.

This elaborate system gave the temple direct control over much of the economy. Whether this resulted in a redistributive

nirvana—a form of ancient socialism in which the state provided for everyone—or an exploitative regime of near-slavery is difficult to say. But it seems to have arisen in response to the unpredictable nature of the Mesopotamian environment. There was little rain, and the flooding of the Tigris and Euphrates was erratic. So agriculture depended on the use of carefully maintained communal irrigation systems and, the Sumerians believed, on making the appropriate offerings to the local gods. Both these tasks were handled by the priesthood, and as villages grew into towns and then cities, more and more power was concentrated into their hands. The simple storehouses of the Neolithic period became elaborate temples, or ziggurats, built on raised, stepped platforms. Numerous rival city-states arose, each with its own resident god, and each ruled by an elite priesthood who maintained the agricultural economy and lived off the surplus it produced. Carvings depict them wearing beards, long kilts, and round head-dresses, and drinking beer from large pots through long straws.

For all this to work, the priests and their subjects needed to be able to record what they had taken in and paid out. Tax receipts were initially kept in the form of tokens within clay "envelopes"—hollow shells of clay, called bullae, with several tokens rattling around inside. Tokens of different shapes were used to represent standard amounts of grain, textiles, or individual cattle. When goods were presented at the temple, the corresponding tokens were placed in a clay envelope, and the tax collector and taxpayer would both impress the envelope's wet clay with their personal signature seals to signify that the envelope's contents accurately reflected the tax paid. The envelope was then stored in the temple archive.

Having started out as a means of recording tax receipts and ration payments, writing soon evolved into a more flexible, expressive, and abstract medium. By around 3000 BCE some symbols had come to stand for particular sounds. At the same time, pictograms made up of deep, wedge-shaped impressions took over from those composed of shallow scratches. This made writing faster but reduced the pictographic quality of the symbols, so that writing began to look more abstract. The end result was the first general-purpose form of writing, based on wedge-shaped, or "cuneiform," indentations made in clay tablets using reeds. It is the ancestor of modern Western alphabets, which are descended from it via the Ugaritic and Phoenician alphabets devised during the second millennium BCE.

Compared with early pictograms, the cuneiform symbol for beer is barely recognizable as a jar shape. But it can be seen, for example, on tablets that tell the story of Enki, the cunning and wily god of agriculture, as he prepares a feast for his father, Enlil. The description of the brewing process is, admittedly, somewhat cryptic. But the steps are recognizable, which means that the world's oldest written recipe is for beer.

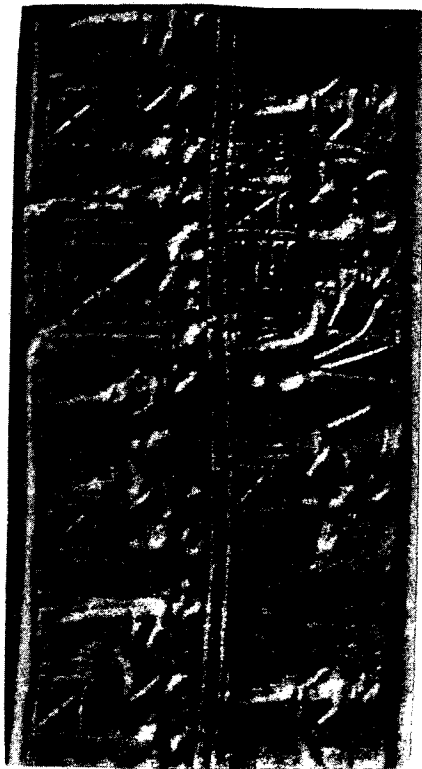


The evolution of the written symbol for beer in cuneiform. Over the years the depiction of the beer jar gradually became more abstract.

Liquid Wealth and Health

In Egypt, as in Mesopotamia, taxes in the form of grain and other goods were presented at the temple and were then redistributed to fund public works. This meant that in both civilizations barley and wheat, and their processed solid and liquid forms, bread and beer, became more than just staple foodstuffs; they were convenient and widespread forms of payment and currency. In Mesopotamia, cuneiform records indicate that the lowest-ranking members of the Sumerian temple workforce were issued a *sila* of beer a day—roughly equivalent to a liter, or two American pints—as part of their ration. Junior officials were given two *sila*, higher officials and ladies of the court three *sila*, and the highest officials five *sila*. Large numbers of identically sized bevel-rimmed bowls found at Sumerian sites seem to have been used as standard units of measurement. Senior officials were given more beer not because they drank more; having drunk their fill, they had some left over to tip messengers and scribes and pay other workers. Liquids, being easily divisible, make ideal currencies.

Later documents from the reign of Sargon, one of a series of kings from the neighboring region of Akkad who united and ruled Sumer's rival city-states from around 2350 BCE, refer to beer as part of the "bride price" (a wedding payment made by the groom's family to the bride's family). Other records indicate that beer was given as payment to women and children for doing a few days' work at the temple: Women received two *sila* and children one *sila*. Similarly, documents show that refugee women and children, who may have been slaves or prisoners of war, were issued monthly beer rations of twenty *sila* for women and ten *sila*



The impression of a cylinder seal depicting a banquet scene, including seated figures drinking beer from a large jar through straws

for children. Soldiers, policemen, and scribes also received special payments of beer on particular occasions, as did messengers as a form of bonus payment. One document from 2035 BCE is a list of provisions paid out to official messengers in the city of Umma. Various amounts of "excellent" beer, "ordinary" beer, garlic, cooking oil, and spices were issued to messengers whose names included Shu-Dummu, Nur-Ishtar, Esur-ili, Ur-Ningirsu, and Bazimu. By this time, the Sumerian state employed three hundred thousand people, all of whom received monthly rations of barley and annual rations of wool, or the equivalent amount of other goods: bread or beer instead of barley, and fabric or garments instead of wool. And every transaction was noted down methodically on indestructible cuneiform tablets by Mesopotamian accountants.

What is without doubt the most spectacular example of the use of beer as a form of payment can be seen on Egypt's Giza

plateau. The workers who built the pyramids were paid in beer, according to records found at a nearby town where the construction workers ate and slept. The records indicate that at the time of the pyramids' construction, around 2500 BCE, the standard ration for a laborer was three or four loaves of bread and two jugs containing about four liters (eight American pints) of beer. Managers and officials received larger quantities of both. No wonder that, according to some ancient graffiti, one team of workers on the third Giza pyramid, built for King Menkaure, styled themselves the "Drunkards of Menkaure." Written records of payments to the construction workers show that the pyramids were built by state employees, rather than by an army of slaves, as was once thought. One theory is that the pyramids were built by farmers during the flood season, when their fields were under water. The state collected grain as tribute and then redistributed it as payment; the building work instilled a sense of national unity, demonstrated the wealth and power of the state, and provided a justification for taxation.

The use of bread and beer as wages or currency meant that they became synonymous with prosperity and well-being. The ancient Egyptians identified them so closely with the necessities of life that the phrase "bread and beer" meant sustenance in general; their combined hieroglyphs formed the symbol for food. The phrase "bread and beer" was also used as an everyday greeting, much like wishing someone good luck or good health. One Egyptian inscription urges women to supply their schoolboy sons with two jars of beer and three small loaves of bread daily to ensure their healthy development. Similarly, "bread and beer" was used by Mesopotamians to mean "food and drink," and one Sumerian word for banquet literally means "the place of beer and bread."

Beer also had a more direct link to health, for both the Mesopotamians and Egyptians used it medicinally. A cuneiform tablet from the Sumerian city of Nippur, dated to around 2100 BCE, contains a pharmacopoeia, or list of medical recipes, based on beer. It is the oldest surviving record of the use of alcohol in medicine. In Egypt, beer's use as a mild sedative was recognized, and it was also the basis for several medicinal concoctions of herbs and spices. Beer was, of course, less likely to be contaminated than water, being made with boiled water, and also had the advantage that some ingredients dissolve more easily in it.

"The Ebers Papyrus," an Egyptian medical text that dates from around 1550 BCE but is evidently based on far older documents, contains hundreds of recipes for herbal remedies, many of which involve beer. Half an onion mixed with frothy beer was said to cure constipation, for example, while powdered olives mixed with beer cured indigestion; a mixture of saffron and beer massaged into a woman's abdomen was prescribed for labor pains.

The Egyptians also believed that their well-being in the afterlife depended on having an adequate supply of bread and beer. The standard funerary offering consisted of bread, beer, oxen, geese, cloth, and natron, a purification agent. In some Egyptian funeral texts the deceased is promised "beer that would not turn sour"—signaling both a desire to be able to pursue beer drinking eternally and the difficulty of storing beer. Scenes and models of brewing and baking have been found in Egyptian tombs, along with jars of beer (long since evaporated) and beer-making equipment. Special sieves for beer making were found in the tomb of Tutankhamen, who died around 1335 BCE. Ordinary citizens who were laid to rest in simple shallow graves were also buried with small jars of beer.

A Drink from the Dawn of Civilization

Beer permeated the lives of Egyptians and Mesopotamians from the cradle to the grave. Their enthusiasm for it was almost inevitable because the emergence of complex societies, the need to keep written records, and the popularity of beer all followed from the surplus of grain. Since the Fertile Crescent had the best climatic conditions for grain cultivation, that was where farming began, where the earliest civilizations arose, where writing first emerged, and where beer was most abundant.

Although neither Mesopotamian nor Egyptian beer contained hops, which only became a standard ingredient in medieval times, both the beverage and some of its related customs would still be recognizable to beer drinkers today, thousands of years later. While beer is no longer used as a form of payment, and people no longer greet each other with the expression "bread and beer," in much of the world it is still considered the staple drink of the working man. Toasting someone's health before drinking beer is a remnant of the ancient belief in beer's magical properties. And beer's association with friendly, unpretentious social interaction remains unchanged; it is a beverage that is meant to be shared. Whether in stone-age villages, Mesopotamian banqueting halls, or modern pubs and bars, beer has brought people together since the dawn of civilization.