

The Social Construct of Alcohol through the Ages

Transcript

Lauren Dogaer

Have you ever found yourself asking why alcohol plays such a big role across so many cultures? Striking a balance between moderation and excess isn't just a modern struggle. It goes back to ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Roman Empire. I'm Lauren, and I'm a postdoctoral fellow in Egyptology at the University of Oxford. I'm fascinated by how today's issues mirror the past, from ancient health warnings to peer pressure at Greek symposium. We're exploring it all. Join me as we get Drunk on History and uncover the timeless truth behind our drinking habits. Welcome to the very first episode of Drunk on History, in which we will sip between moderation and excess through the ages. I have the pleasure to introduce Professor Michael Dietler from the University of Chicago. He's an anthropologist working on the social construct of alcohol, food, and feasting, and the main geographical area on which he has been working is the ancient Mediterranean. Thank you very much for joining the podcast.

Prof. Michael Dietler

It's a pleasure to be here.

Lauren Dogaer

Welcome. And to start off, I would like to ask you, how do we actually define alcohol? Because as strange as it sounds, many ancient civilizations did not actually have a term for the word alcohol. So when did a common definition of the term alcohol arise and how come it did not exist in the past?

Prof. Michael Dietler

Yeah, it's a very good question because we tend to take it automatically that this is a common conception. But in fact, we use the term alcohol as a kind of collective term for a variety of different beverages. In fact, a huge variety of beverages that have the common element of this chemical called ethanol in them, which is a product of fermentation of sugars that has psychoactive properties called consciousness altering properties. But of course, the exact nature and definition of ethanol was not accomplished until the 19th century. And then the collective term alcohol was more or less a product of the prohibitionist movement, which tended to link these different things like wine and beer and various forms of whiskey together as this common element called alcohol. So most people in the past, and in fact most people around the world today, don't think, they don't use this concept of alcohol as this collective thing.

They have different beverages which have these pleasant stimulating effects, but they don't necessarily think of them as part of the same thing because they don't really understand the common alcohol.

Lauren Dogaer

Yes. So now that we know how to more or less define alcohol, I think it's safe to say that almost no civilization is ignoring the existence of alcohol, even in societies or religions where alcohol is banned or is forbidden. It is somehow still important in being absent. So how come alcohol can even be so present even when absent in a society?

Prof. Michael Dietler

Yeah, that's certainly a very good observation because alcohol is virtually never ignored. It's either viewed very positively or very negatively, or sometimes people have ambivalent feelings about it, but it's always seen as a powerful substance. And it's been very important in a lot of ritual practices throughout history and prehistory. But it has also been an object by certain religions of kind of condemnatory violation of their principles. And so they have acted to try and stop people from drinking, precisely because it's a powerful element. Alcohol has been consumed for about the past 10,000 years all over the world. And when Europeans, for example, in their first colonial ventures in the 16th century moved out, they discovered that virtually every people around the earth had their own indigenous forms of alcohol, the only exceptions being parts of Oceania and parts of North America. And they quickly adopted alcohol and adapted to it after contact. So this is a very long history and it's a widespread phenomenon. And certain societies like Islamic societies in the Arabian world moved to ban alcohol because again, it was seen as this kind of vital, powerful force. Certain evangelical Christians in this country as well have also reacted against alcohol. But if we think back in history, the pre-Islamic world was one where alcohol was very common. And in fact, some of the earliest wine and other alcoholic beverages came from areas that are today officially banning alcohol. And even the word alcohol is actually of Arabic origin, as is the word lambic for the distillation element for distilled alcohol in the modern world.

Lauren Dogaer

Yes, it seems that alcohol is really a very widespread phenomenon. And it's really interesting that it is so important in so many civilizations and so many religions. And I think alcohol is definitely a contributing factor when it comes to the formation also of social identities. But as you already pointed out, there are so many countries in the world where also no one is actually drinking, thinking indeed of many Middle Eastern countries. And there are still a lot of ways in which people here build a communal social identity. So how do you compare the influence of having alcohol against not having alcohol in forming a social identity?

Prof. Michael Dietler

Well, alcohol is one of a series of things that I call embodied material culture. That is, there are elements of material culture that are made to be destroyed by consuming them into the human body. So various kinds of food, for example, drugs, alcohol, all of these things are important cultural artifacts, but they're all made to be taken into the body and they actually form. You've heard this famous expression, you are what you eat. And that's sort of an expression of this idea that there's something very special about things that we take into the body and that actually constitute our being. And those kinds of, those forms of material culture tend to be very closely associated with the inculcation of a sense of identity and personal and group identity. And alcohol, because of its psychoactive effects, tends to have an even more important role in this sphere. And it's often covered with a lot of laws governing its use and the way in which people behave after imbibing it. So it's very often a kind of central element in the construction of identity and the actual inculcation of those identities as well. So those include things like social class, ethnic identity, gender identity, age distinctions, all of these things are marked by different kinds of drinking practices. And religion is another one of these. So the way in which, for example, Catholics and Protestants view alcohol or Muslims and Hindus or different castes within the Hindu world, There tend to be very strongly emotional ties to the idea of drinking properly or certain kinds of drinks or not drinking and who can drink, who can drink together. And these things are all ways of sort of structuring social life so that people understand, they gradually learn these technical body techniques for tastes and different kinds of alcohol, ways of drinking and ways of understanding what's happening when people are drinking together. And of course, those all change over time as well, since nothing stays static.

Lauren Dogaer

No, absolutely. There are definitely different kinds of connotations also. like tied to different types of drink. I would also say that, for example, nowadays, uh, champagne is maybe a bit more, more fancy. You would maybe store a bottle of, or a special bottle of wine for a certain occasion. You would grab a beer after work. And certain types of drink you only consume as a digestive, but you would never drink before eating. So you really have these different kinds of connotations attached to it, and you already mentioned it as well. The gender aspect is also very real even today, because when I go out with a male friend or colleague and he orders a glass of wine and I order beer and a different waiter brings the drinks, I always get the glass of wine. So I'm also wondering if you could say something more about that. Like in ancient civilizations, do people also have this certain like connotations between different types of drink and then certain occasions or moments in the day and gender as well.

Prof. Michael Dietler

Yeah, these things are not new. So these kinds of gender and ethnic and class distinctions centering on the consumption of alcohol are quite ancient. They are obviously different in each society. But for example, the distinction between beer and wine was a common one in a number of different societies. So ancient Egypt, for example, beer was the drink of common people and wine was the drink of the elite. This was also true in Mesopotamia, where wine was something reserved for the elite class in that society. You get some different situations, for example, in Greece, where it became not so much a class marker as an ethnic marker. So in Greece, only barbarians drank beer and Greeks drank wine. But of course, women were not allowed to drink with the men, if at all. And so you have these rituals of consumption, like the so-called symposium, which means literally drinking together. It was a drinking party after the dinner. And it was exclusively men who drank at these things, except for the people called heterai, who were courtesans who were allowed to be there. But no proper woman would be allowed to drink at the symposium. This was very different in the Etruscan world, contemporary Etruscan world, where wives were allowed to drink with their husbands at these banquets. So these are very important kinds of distinctions that mark in a very powerful way the differences between classes, ethnic groups, genders, age groups, and so forth. And as you say, in the modern world, there are all sorts of distinctions between, let's say in Europe or the United States, between where women are allowed to drink, how they're expected to behave when they drink, their tastes in different kinds of alcohol, say beer versus wine. Or in the United States, there is this idea of manly drinks and girly drinks, where men drink whiskey straight, and women like these cocktails that are sort of sweetened and with various fruit juices in them. And these are very distinctive markers. So if a man takes one of these drinks, it's considered to be a girly drink. It's an immediate sort of shocking thing to a lot of people. These things are felt in a very kind of powerful, emotional way too. They're not just abstract signs. They're things that people learn over time to sort of think that this is a natural taste. And it's through experience, through seeing what other people do and following those patterns.

Lauren Dogaer

Coming back to this sort of emotional feeling, I think another aspect that is sort of can be very emotionally felt is like this age-old tension between the positive and the negative sides of alcohol. You know, you have a lot of health benefits that are associated with consuming wine, for example. But of course, this can very easily all turn into problem drinking. And there are definitely ways to sort of scientifically explain when you have this turning point. But could you give a little bit of your anthropological expertise in when the line is crossed, so to say?

Prof. Michael Dietler

Yeah, this is a really important question because a lot of modern scientific research on alcohol has been motivated by the medical community, thinking of it entirely through the lens of alcoholism, or alcohol use disorder, as it's now called, and also thinking of drinking as a pathology, whereas anthropologists tend to look at it through the idea of normal drinking, that is what most people do most of the time, and seeing it as a kind of socially integrated cultural practice and trying to understand why so many people view this in a very positive way. So you get these sort of contrasting perspectives, and motivations for actually doing the research, these sort of ambivalences are often shared by people in society as well. So in every society, there are concerns about taking a good thing and taking it to excess and the kind of problems that can cause. But anthropologists tend to think of problem drinking not as a single kind of pathology that is universal in its distribution, but as something that has to be defined about in contrast to what people consider normal drinking. So every society has its own conception of what constitutes normal good behavior in drinking, and it has ways of sort of dealing with people who take it to excess, but they tend to be quite different. So the expectations are very different as well. And it's not only ways of drinking that are culturally coded and distinctive, but also what is often called drunken comportment. So cultural styles of inebriation. There's a tendency in Western society to think that people immediately become sort of, when they drink to excess, become sort of aggressive and violent and loud. But that's not necessarily the case in many societies. The expectation is that people, as they drink more and more, will become more sort of quiet and introverted. In other cases, it's considered the idea is that people will become more lively and sing and dance, and there will be this sort of communal festivity that goes on. So again, these are sort of culturally coded things, and people have their own expectations about how people will behave. And again, often these are different for men and women in the same society. So women will be expected to behave differently from men as they drink to inebriation. And even within those differences, there may be class differences, so that men and women will have different expectations for behavior depending upon the social class to which they belong. So all of these things create expectations about what constitutes normal and abnormal patterns of drinking. And then there are cultural mechanisms built into sort of control the behavior that is seen to be excessive. But what that is, that is the sort of abnormal problem drinking is really different in different societies.

Lauren Dogaer

Yes, absolutely. You already mentioned the festivity aspect that one of the ways or one of the effects that alcohol can have is to make things more festive. And thinking about the ancient civilizations that we are studying, I think the feasting practices or the material culture that has been left from these feasting practices is a very good way for us to study alcohol in the ancient world. So I'm thinking drinking vessels, wine mixing vessels, different kinds of cups. So could you explain maybe a little bit more about how

material culture from ancient civilizations can actually help us in understanding the different alcohol usages?

Prof. Michael Dietler

Right. Well, one of the interesting things is, and fortunately for archaeologists, is that alcohol is also liquid material culture, and it needs containers. It needs containers to make it, to transport it, to drink it and serve it. And alcohol itself is not very durable. So it's an organic substance that disappears usually through consumption. But fortunately, because it has this need for containers, And many of these are made of ceramics or metal. They tend to be quite durable. So they provide an excellent way of studying production and consumption and transport practices in the ancient world. And most of what we know about drinking practices comes directly from those vestiges of drinking production and consumption. Now, there are also iconographic forms of evidence, so paintings or reliefs on on stone that show us people actually engaging in the drinking practices. And so we can use those together with the material objects to study what people were doing with the alcohol, what kinds of alcohol they were consuming, and how, for example, these kinds of social distinctions or ethnic distinctions were carried out in the past. And fortunately, in the last, say, couple of decades, the techniques for identifying the alcohol that was contained in these different kinds of cups and vessels have been vastly improved. So because most of these ceramic vessels are a bit porous, parts of the alcohol get seeped into the walls. And so we can now extract the residues, the organic residues from those and analyze them in the laboratory and find out, for example, whether people are drinking wine or beer or something else. And that has really helped us a lot to go beyond just looking at the forms and the iconography, to actually really see, for example, how beer and wine were used differently in different contexts.

Lauren Dogaer

So feasting, of course, the term feasting is very broad and can mean different things. I'm sure there would have been festive binge drinking going on, but on the other hand, feasting practices did not necessarily have to be these very big social gatherings either. So are there different types of feasts from the ancient world that we can study and their relationship with alcohol?

Prof. Michael Dietler

Yes, feasting is almost a universally common thing. That is in the sense that we define it as a kind of a ritualized practice of communal consumption, which involves food and drink or just food or just drink. But it's a really widespread phenomenon. And it tends to act differently, to have different social functions and different kinds of cultural manifestations in different types of societies. So for example, in small scale societies that are, we call acephalus, that have no formalized leadership, no political roles,

alcohol acts as a way of sort of gaining individual prestige through sharing of alcohol and feasting, sponsoring public feasts, or even engaging in competitive feasting. And so it's a very common way of sort of building up the prestige in a small-scale society to convince other people to do things that you want them to do, since nobody can order anyone else to do anything. When you begin to get more centralized forms of leaderships like chiefdoms, for example, or even kingdoms and empires, then feasting starts to play a different role and it becomes part of a kind of expression of patron-client relationships. So the chief or the king is expected to host large feasts, which are not expected to be repaid by the people who are going to them, although they may provide materials for the feast through tribute. But these become a very important kind of symbolic expression of power relationships within societies. And they also then are used in the political realm to solidify various kinds of power relations. And this goes on even today. So if you, for example, look at visitors to countries like official visits by, let's say, President of the United States to France or the King of England to France, there will be usually a big feast held in which something like wine or champagne becomes a really important marker of this kind of shared status in the political realm. So it has a really pervasive role in various kinds of social connections and political functions. But it tends to operate a bit differently according to the structure of the political system that one is looking at.

Lauren Dogaer

Yeah, and I think these feasts, even, yeah, they're still also happening today, as you mentioned. You are sort of already touching upon it, but what would have been the more economic or more political meaning behind organizing these feasts and maybe how the alcohol played a role in these political structures and how it also played a very important economic role. So how does alcohol fit in there in how the ancient political structures are sort of organizing these feasts?

Prof. Michael Dietler

Yeah, again, we see feasting on very small scale in, say, Acephalus settlements in different parts of the ancient world. But also even things like the Inca Empire, in which consumption of chicha, maize beer, was a really important phenomenon. And so the elite palaces actually had huge areas where women would brew massive quantities of chicha for these royal ceremonies and festivities. And it was such an important part of the political economy of those societies that you see this reproduced in a variety of different ways around the world. It's reproduced in iconography as well. The sharing of drink among the elite becomes a symbol of their status and their political power within those societies. And in terms of the economic role of alcohol, again, it depends on the type of society. One thing I should mention is that unlike the modern world, ancient forms of alcohol, for the most part, were things that disappeared very quickly. So traditional forms of beer, for example, will go off after a couple of days after

fermentation. So you have to consume it immediately. It means that it can't be transported over great distances. It can't really become a sort of circulating commodity. And this is true of most traditional, say, African beers or chicha, maize beers, things like that. up to today. The one major exception in the ancient world was wine, which could actually be preserved in amphorae for periods of as much as 25 years or so, and could be stockpiled and traded. And so you get an economy developing of a wine trade in the ancient Mediterranean, where, for example, by the Roman period, there were ships laden with up to 10,000 amphorae of wine sailing around the Mediterranean, and millions of these amphorae were traded throughout, say, France all the way up into Britain. But wine was the big exception. So most of the alcohol consumed was actually locally made, often in the household, by people collecting grain, growing grain, and using the grain to make these small-scale festivities. Or in the case of a state like the Inca, to have huge breweries attached to the Inca ruler that would provide the alcohol for these events. Now in the modern world, most of the alcohol consumed, let's say a large percentage of it, is alcohol that can be preserved and transported. So because we learned about the preservative properties of hops in the Middle Ages, beer now is something which can be traded around. The hops are preservative. Wine distilled alcohols are things that can be traded and stockpiled and kept for long periods of time. And so it's much easier for alcohol to become an important part of the commercial economy of the world. There's still a huge amount of alcohol that's produced on a household level, especially in places like Africa, China, Latin America, and other countries like this where probably More than 60% of the alcohol consumed is actually from local production like this. But nevertheless, the alcohol business, the economy, has become a billion dollar, multi-billion dollar business with the circulation of this material around the world constantly. And that really dates back to this period where you began to get these more stable forms of alcohol. Distillation is known from older texts going all the way back to the Greeks and perhaps even earlier. but it was not used for beverage alcohol until the 16th century. And then you begin to get things like whiskey produced in Ireland and Scotland and various other forms of alcohol that were actually much more powerful than the existing forms of alcohol as well. So with wine and the distilled forms of alcohol appearing from the Middle Ages on, you had vastly increased possibilities for this becoming a commercial item. And it became increasingly an important part of the economy.

Lauren Dogaer

To change the topic a little bit, alcohol also often plays or plays at least a role in funerals. And also even today, this is a very interesting distinction, I think. In some regions, it's very custom and even very respectful to sort of toast the dead and then preferably with a kind of drink that that person would have very very much liked, while in other regions this is sort of seen as impolite because it looks like you're celebrating

something and you shouldn't be celebrating, you should be very sad. Is this something that we also already see in earlier periods or is this something much more modern?

Prof. Michael Dietler

No, it's again quite common in the ancient world. So many different kinds of life crisis ceremonies like marriages, funerals, initiations, have required feasting to be sort of marking the ritual nature of what is happening and the passage of people from one phase of life to another, from life to death. And of course, depending upon the local understanding of the role of alcohol in those feasts, alcohol has been a very common element of those. And in fact, it's often a marker of the ritual status of an event. There's a famous saying about, by a group in Tanzania, who said, if there's no beer, it's not a ritual. So it becomes such an important symbolic marker of the status of the event that it's really essential to have it there. For example, you can think of a modern marriage and champagne. That's what marks it as this particular kind of event. So the use of alcohol in funerary practices has been very common. We find, for example, my archaeological work has been mostly in southern France. And we find very commonly there are containers with beverages and drinking paraphernalia that are buried with the person in the grave. And it's quite clear that there have been drinking ceremonies associated with the funeral itself, but also alcohol provided for the person who's interred in the grave. As you say, in other societies that's perhaps less well viewed. But again, it really is an individual aspect of the the way in which feasting is construed in different societies and the significance of alcohol in those feasting practices.

Lauren Dogaer

Yeah, and I also think that in all of these feasting practices in a more globalizing ancient world and in a world where a lot of contacts happen between different civilizations, also drinking practices would have been taken over from one civilization to the other. I'm wondering, is this then just a form of prestige when they take over drinking practices or is it just simple curiosity? And when people take over the drinking practices, is it then first the form of alcohol that they take over and then the type of pottery and then later on the whole package of drinking customs? Or how did this exactly work?

Prof. Michael Dietler

Yeah, that's a very good question. And it's also a complicated one because as I'm sure it's highly variable depending upon the context. And so when foreign objects are appropriated by one society from another, they usually change their meaning as they traverse these cultural frontiers. And they're used in different kinds of ways for different purposes. So for example, in the work that I've done on the wine trade in ancient France, It's quite clear that the main thing that native Celtic-speaking peoples in southern France wanted from the Greeks and the Etruscans was wine and some drinking cups. The rest of Greek and Etruscan culture, they really had no interest in at

all. But they weren't trying to imitate Greek practices or sort of import the symposium. They were taking this alien form of alcohol and using it in their own indigenous feasting practices. And so there are a variety of reasons why this might be attractive to them. But it's clear when you see the way in which it's used that they did not see themselves at all as imitating Greeks or Etruscans. They were simply taking some an exotic form of material culture and incorporating it into their local practices in ways that made sense to them. And so this was quite clear to the Greeks as well, who used drinking and feasting practices as a marker of difference between Greeks and barbarians. So for example, the Greeks drank wine only when it was mixed with water. That was an essential part of the symposium and this idea of sort of moderating the Dionysiac effects of wine, this idea of not doing anything to excess and sort of having this balance. Whereas for them, people like the Celts who drank their wine neat, straight without mixing it with water, This was a clear sign that they were not imitating the symposium and that they were drinking in a very different way. This marked them as barbarians. So on both sides, it's clear that the mere transfer of a form of drink or a few drinking vessels was not a way of this process of sort of what's often called acculturation, that kind of imitation of 1 culture by another. it was something very different that was quite distinctive. Again, in the ancient world, you see, if you take Egypt, for example, which I know you know quite well, wine grapes were not indigenous to the area. So wine became eventually very important in Egyptian culture, but it was based initially on the importation of wine from the Levant. And you see, for example, there's an early pharaonic tomb, which has huge store rooms laden with wine that was imported from the Levant. And it was only after that they gradually imported the vines to make wine themselves. And then it became a very important kind of beverage, but again, not consumed in the same way that it would have been in other parts of the Middle East. So it's something that is incorporated into the culture and its meaning and the practices associated with it are transformed completely. There are contexts in which there may be imitation of an alien beverage or alien practices that lended a certain kind of prestige because it's done in a certain way. So for example, you can imagine in the Roman period, there was an eventual process where some peoples adopted Roman drinking and dining practices as a way of sort of showing their incorporation into the Roman Empire and Roman citizenship. But the way in which this happens is extremely variable.

Lauren Dogaer

I think it's safe to say that changes in drinking practices always sort of implicate bigger changes in a society in general. That's why I believe it's such an interesting case study because it really tells you a lot more about the society as a whole. Maybe to finish up with one final question, comparing alcohol usage in different civilizations is of course difficult. It's tricky to sort of develop a blueprint that would work for all of them, because in order to compare cultures, one should be really aware of how alcohol is embedded on a social, cultural, political, economic level. But as you know, In all of the

different next episodes of the podcast, we will dive into different ancient civilizations. And my question for you now is, do you think it's possible to compare alcohol usage in different cultures? And if so, what should we be aware of?

Prof. Michael Dietler

Yeah, I think it's really, in fact, crucial. If we're going to understand it in any single context, we have to study it comparatively in a number of different cases. And that, I would say, also includes ethnographic cases in the present, because it's that comparative analysis which will point out the subtle distinctions that mark what's happening in one context or another. And I think the main thing to do in trying to assess how alcohol operates in, let's say, an ancient Egyptian context or Greek one or Celtic one, Mesopotamia, is to develop as broad as possible of a perspective on the multiple ways in which alcohol is produced, used, transported, the roles it plays in the politics of the society, the economy. And it's really only through doing that kind of comparative analysis I think that you're really able to sort of understand the subtle manipulations of alcohol in a particular context. And also look at the way, chronologically, the way in which practices change. So it's important not to assume that things are once you have a cultural pattern in one place, it is going to be like that in a sort of stiff, stable way. Because we know the one thing, one law of culture that is really absolute is that things constantly change. So we need to think of culture more as a kind of project rather than some static thing. And so we notice that in all drinking practices, because of their contacts with other cultures, because of internal processes, of competition between different classes or social factions or age classes or genders, that there are constant pressures to sort of transform the practices and their meaning. And these are going on constantly. They're always evolving and they have in the past as well. So I think it's important to think in that dual scale, comparatively across different geographical regions, different cultures, but also within those different contexts to look chronologically at how things change over time. and try to understand why they're changing.

Lauren Dogaer

I think this is a very nice way to end the first episode, that it's a very important journey on which we go to study the different civilizations in comparison in order to understand each of them better individually. So thank you very much, Michael, for joining this introductory episode. It was very fun to get drunk on history with you. So thank you very much.

Prof. Michael Dietler

Well, thank you very much. for the invitation. And this seems like a really brilliant idea for a series of podcasts. And congratulations on coming up with this. I wish you very good luck in the rest of it.

Lauren Dogaer

Thank you very much. We hope you enjoyed this episode of Drunk on History. If you're thirsty for more tales from the ancient world, don't miss our next episode. It's full of even more drinking stories from past civilizations. Drunk on History is made in cooperation with the new media center of the University of Basel.