

Beer in Bronze Age Mesopotamia

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. Hello everyone. It is my great pleasure today to welcome Professor Tate Paulette from North Carolina State University to the podcast. Tate is a specialist in urban food systems in the ancient world, as well as an archaeologist focusing on the ancient Near East and especially on Mesopotamia. And probably the coolest thing he has ever done in his career so far is to recreate Sumerian beer using authentic ingredients, equipment, and brewing techniques. So Tate, very much welcome to the podcast.

Professor Tate Paulette

Thank you. It's great to be here.

Lauren Dogaer

Before we discuss how you ended up recreating this ancient beer, I would like to zoom out a little bit for our listeners and set the stage. So could you maybe tell us a little bit more about what is actually Mesopotamia? It's not really one big region, but rather a conglomeration of cities. We have Babylonia, Assyria. So I think it would be helpful for the listeners to know a little bit the background there and also why the term itself can be slightly problematic. And in addition, maybe a little bit the different scripts and languages that were used there.

Professor Tate Paulette

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, so when we talk about Mesopotamia, I mean, this word means between the rivers. So we're basically talking about this region that's sort of between and around the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in what is modern day Iraq and parts of modern day Syria. And so So this is not their term for the region. This is a term that has kind of a complicated colonial past. And so we tend to still use it despite that, but trying to recognize that kind of problematic past. I mean, like you said, I mean, for a lot of Mesopotamian history, this was a world of cities. And so people's primary allegiances

and things were to their specific cities. But then there were these broader, there's recognitions of different regions. So we often talk about just kind of southern Mesopotamia versus northern Mesopotamia. And like you said, they did have words for those, Babylonia being southern Mesopotamia and Assyria, northern Mesopotamia. Those come in 2000 BC and after. Prior to that, there was another set of terms, Sumer and Akkad, which is basically a subdivision of southern Mesopotamia, where you have Sumer in the south and Akkad in the north. And so yeah, they used different terms for this, for kind of regional subdivisions. Yeah, I mean, so this is a famous region for all kinds of reasons, but one of the big things is that right in the vicinity of about 3000 BC, a little before that, you have all kind of happening together, the world's first cities, the world's first states, and the world's first writing. You would ask me to say a little something about writing. So the writing system was called cuneiform, meaning wedge-shaped, because they wrote on clay tablets mostly, where you would take a reed stylus and impress it into the clay. At first, the signs weren't exactly wedge shaped, but then as you get into the development of the system, they are very much little wedges that are impressed with the stylus into the clay. So that's why it's called that. So that's the script cuneiform. But as with scripts today, you could use that to write a variety of different languages, and they did. The two big ones, though, were Sumerian and Akkadian. So Sumerian is... a language that's not related to any other known languages, as far as we know. And Akkadian is a Semitic language, so it's related to other languages like Arabic and Hebrew, other Semitic languages.

Lauren Dogaer

Thank you very much. Now we know where Mesopotamia was located. I want to go into how you recreated Sumerian beer. And for that, we have to refer to your book, which I read with a lot of pleasure, *In the Land of Ninkasi: A History of Beer in Ancient Mesopotamia*. And you start the book with a Sumerian proverb that I absolutely love, not to know beer is not normal. And well, you took that quite literally and thought, well, let's remake the beer from old recipes. And I of course want to ask you a little bit how that exactly went and if we actually have ancient recipes, because now I'm thinking about a couple of those Mesopotamian drinking songs that we have, especially the hymn to Ninkasi, a lot of brewing ingredients that are specifically mentioned, but can you really use this to recreate ancient beer?

Professor Tate Paulette

Yeah, that's a big question. Yeah, so I guess I'll start out and talk a little about this experimental brewing. I've actually kind of really done it twice now, way back at the beginning of my journey into the subject. And then just this past year, I was involved in another one. The first one, yeah, I was a graduate student at the University of Chicago, working on a dissertation about grain storage. So I was already working on grain related things, but a friend and I heard about this new project that was going to be a

collaboration between Great Lakes Brewing Company in Cleveland and what is now called the Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures at the University of Chicago. That's where we were doing our PhDs and they were looking for volunteers to be on this team. And so of course we immediately volunteered and we had started looking into the topic of beer, but we were only just beginning to learn about it. So it's a really interesting way to be kind of thrown into a topic by being asked to figure out how to recreate this ancient beer. And so that's how I got going on this topic was Like you said, our goal as a team that was made-up of archeologists, assyriologists, that's cuneiform specialists on one side, but then also a team of brewers in Cleveland. Our goal was to try to be as accurate and authentic as we could be, even though there's huge gaps in our knowledge, which becomes very clear, I think, in the course of my book. I try to be very upfront about what we know and what we don't actually know that well. And so we wanted to be as authentic as we could. So we were trying to use the correct ingredients, replica brewing equipment. So we made ceramic vessels that were modeled on ancient examples, even if we didn't know for certain that those ancient ones were actually used for brewing beer. It was a lot of educated guesswork. And then, of course, trying to figure out the brewing process, how they actually went about it was also a big challenge. And yeah, So you wanted to hear a little more about, because the Hymn to Ninkasi does play a key part in that. Maybe I'll just mention first that this past year, I also did another effort at this kind of experimental brewing with a local brewery here in Raleigh called Trophy Brewing, where we had Alton Brown was coming to campus. He's a kind of well-known food writer and TV personality. And the dean of my college here asked if maybe I wanted to make some ancient beer to serve to him on stage. And so we had another go at it. We didn't for as an extreme authenticity in this case, but what we really focused on was this one ingredient called bappir, which maybe we could talk about later if you want to. But the thing about recipes is hard. So the Hymn to Ninkasi is definitely the most famous text about beer in Mesopotamia. If you've heard about beer in Mesopotamia before, there's a good chance you've heard about this. It is definitely often referred to as if it is a recipe, but it is definitely not a recipe. It is So they had this goddess of beer, Ninkasi, and this is a song of some kind that's praising the goddess. The way that it goes about praising the goddess is basically because when we see her depicted elsewhere and she comes up in literature and other things, she is really a brewer fundamentally. She's the goddess of beer, but she really is a brewer. And so this song praises her by showing us little images of her at work in the brewery doing the key activities of the brewer. And why it's been treated as kind of like a recipe is because It seems like the activities might be arranged kind of in chronological order, like showing us the steps that they went through to brew beer. But I spend quite a lot of time in the book saying, let's maybe step back here and temper our expectations about how much we can get from this text. But it is really useful. It's a lot of what we have to go on. But I do this by I go on a sort of extended. little discussion of this is a song. It might even have been something like a drinking song. It always appears, we have 3 versions of it. In all

three of those cases, it appears alongside another song that we call it a drinking song. We don't know if that's exactly what it was. But so I go on this little comparison with modern day drinking songs to say you wouldn't really use those to try to serve as instructions for brewing beer. So can we really do that with this? But it has played a really important role. There are other texts. This is a piece of literature, really. We have huge amounts of writing from ancient Mesopotamia. I think many people aren't exactly aware of that. I mean, hundreds of thousands of cuneiform documents and thousands of those mention beer in some way or another. And among all these texts, a whole lot of them are economic documents, like receipts of different kinds. And so some things that we have that are also kind of like recipes but not really are in that realm. We have these great ones from the city of Girsu during what's called the early dynastic period. They're basically documenting deliveries of brewing ingredients that were coming into probably a temple brewery. And sometimes they just tell us about these ingredients, but sometimes they tell us exactly the quantities of each of these ingredients that were used to brew a certain volume of a particular type of beer, which is really interesting because they had basically five types of beer. They had golden beer, dark beer, sweet dark beer, reddish brown beer, and strained beer. So in these texts, we get a really interesting breakdown. It's kind of like a proportional breakdown of the ingredients. So when I did that earlier experimental project, we didn't stick super closely to these. We were paying attention to them. But in this more recent one in Raleigh, we actually tried to recreate one of those, the golden beer and the dark beer, sticking very closely to the proportions of ingredients.

Lauren Dogaer

That sounds absolutely fascinating. For everyone who is actually interested, you can find everything about the recreation of the beer in the epilogue of your book, also the recipe. So maybe some of our listeners want to give it a go. And you already mentioned the term bappir, which you also used for the experimental brewing that you did, and it's often translated as bread cake. Could you tell us a little bit more about what this exactly means and why it is so essential to the Mesopotamian beer brewing.

Professor Tate Paulette

Yeah, sure. And it's a really difficult question. It is definitely essential to beer brewing, at least for many of their beers. But we also don't exactly know what it was. We have lots of little hints. And so yeah, these beers, just in terms of ingredients, really the two key ingredients across several thousand years of Mesopotamian history seem to have been malted barley, which is a key ingredient in many of our own beers. And then this other thing called bappir in Sumerian. And so they also used other things like emmer wheat sometimes and date syrup and some other grain products that might have been kind of roasted or toasted. But these two malted barley and bappir were key. And so figuring out how to brew their beer really means confronting the question of what bappir is. And

so it appears in quite a lot of texts, but it really is a mystery trying to pull together the different little hints that we get about it. And of course, we don't really know if the bappir that's mentioned, I don't know, during the early dynastic period and 2400 BC or something is the same as the bappir that's mentioned several thousand years later. You're right. For a long time, it's been translated as something like beer bread. Although it has also been recognized for a long time that that's maybe not exactly right, but we don't really know. I mean, the kind of hints we get about it are that it was made with barley. It's not entirely clear if that barley was always malted or if it could be unmalted. It was sometimes included some kinds of aromatic ingredients like herbs or spices, maybe a syrup, a sweet syrup sometimes, which almost certainly would have been date syrup, which they had in abundance. We get hints that making bappir involved mixing up a dough of some kind, sometimes kneading of a dough. We know that there was at least sometimes an oven involved. We don't know exactly what kind of oven. We know that there were various ways bappir could be processed, like it could be spread out or crushed or soaked or dried. We know that there were different qualities of bappir, like good versus ordinary bappir. We know that it could be, this is a really interesting thing is that in different cities, They sort of counted it in different ways. So you could record your bappir by weight or by volume or by count. Count as if it's some kind of a loaf or other kind of unit. Sometimes bappir was even used in other things, not for beer, like as a cooking ingredient in some stews, soups. And a big thing is that the word for brewer was written basically with the signs meaning bappir man. So this was a really fundamental ingredient. But we know these little hints, but we don't really know exactly what it was, if it was actually a bread or a cake. One much earlier effort to recreate Mesopotamian beer, they made it be kind of like biscotti, like a twice baked bread. And they were using it early in the brewing process, basically during the mash where it was being added to the malted barley and water and steeped at a warm temperature, because the big question, partly because we don't know exactly what it was, we don't know exactly what it was doing in the brewing process. So one of the other suggestions is that it might have been like a fermentation starter. So this was adding bappir was your way to intentionally initiate fermentation with yeast, bacteria, et cetera. And so a number of people have thought over the years that it might have been kind of like a dried out fermentation starter, maybe even like a sourdough that's been dried out. And so in both of the projects that I was involved in, that was the interpretation that we went with. So I've spent a lot of time trying to figure out how do you make this dried out sourdough version of bappir? For example, how do you make it in an oven and still preserve the yeast so that it will actually serve as a fermentation starter? Yeah, so it's a really difficult ingredient. I mean, yeah, we don't know exactly what it was, how it was used. We don't know whether it might have changed significantly over time. We only get little hints about who was actually making it, where they were making it, what equipment they used. There's all kinds of questions, but it's fundamental. We want to understand how they were brewing this beer.

Lauren Dogaer

I think bappir still remains a little bit of a mystery, but it's... Very interesting to see that you managed to get quite far in recreating this ancient beer. And something that you also mentioned a couple of times in your book is that you say that beer was discovered many times in the history of the world. So this kind of means that we don't have an oldest or an earliest brewery or an oldest location where maybe festive binge drinking would have been happening. I'm thinking now specifically of the site Gobekli Tepe in modern day Turkiye, which has a lot to do with this fundamental change of a hunter-gatherer society into agriculture to reach certain ritual and social goals in which the brewing of beer must have also played a very, very important role. So could you explain a little bit more about the fact that beer was invented so many times in the history of the world?

Professor Tate Paulette

Yeah, sure. I mean, this is something that I always try to emphasize. I think partly because I've often over the years encountered the idea that maybe beer was invented in Mesopotamia or Egypt and it was invented there and then it spread out. And I don't want to deny that there could be elements of a spread because like this period that you're talking about, if brewing beer really sort of came along with the Neolithic revolution, with like the birth of agriculture, we do know that at least part there was a spread of this new lifestyle. And so it is possible that there was an element of sort of beer spreading out. But certainly if you step back and look globally, and if you take a pretty broad definition of beer, that is if you assume that basically any alcoholic beverage where they're using a grain as the main source of fermentable sugars. If you take that kind of definition, people in different parts of the world were taking whatever local grain they had and coming across either sort of inventing, like intentionally playing around with it and figuring out that they could ferment it or accidentally discovering it. these very different traditions, whether they're using maize or rice or millet and sorghum. And so you have all of these kind of independent inventions or discoveries of beer. And I think, well, we are certainly learning a whole lot more these days about those earliest parts of the story because organic residue analysis, which has been developed over the past few decades, where you're basically taking residues left within ceramic vessels or stone vessels and other things and analyzing to try to figure out what had originally been in those vessels. We're now seeing more and more of that and a lot of the attention has been placed on looking for very early traces of alcoholic beverages. So we are learning, over the next couple of decades, we will learn a lot more about about those early days. And I think it's going to show us basically the more we look, the more we're going to find in those very early periods. I mean, I should say I write about this in the book, but the focus of the book is really this period starting more like 3000 BC onward, because this is when we start to get just really wonderful evidence from Mesopotamia. The way that I

talk about it, is I call it the world's first great beer culture. And certainly people who study Egypt might like to argue that Egypt could also be called that around the same time. But I mean, what I'm trying to highlight there is that in all these studies like organic residue analysis, looking at the very early traces, it's important information, but we're usually just getting like a little glimpse into these cultures of alcoholic beverages. But when we get to 3000 BC in Mesopotamia and onward, we suddenly have just so much evidence that we can really talk about this beer culture in its entirety, I guess. And so that's what I really focus attention on. It's partly because that's when we start getting written records. So we have both archaeological evidence, artistic evidence, and written evidence to work with.

Lauren Dogaer

Yeah, we certainly do have a lot of sources from Mesopotamia. When we are talking about Mesopotamian history, we of course also have to address the Epic of Gilgamesh, the king of Uruk. It's this canonical text of Mesopotamia and alcohol does play a very important role in it. We have the wild man Enkidu who is sent to the king of Uruk to challenge Gilgamesh by the gods to challenge him because he was such a tyrant to his people. The story actually, and this is something that I found really fascinating, this story tells us that it is the drinking of beer that makes the the wild man sort of acquainted with civilization and makes him a human so what does this actually tell us about how alcohol and beer was viewed in Mesopotamian society?

Professor Tate Paulette

Yeah you're exactly right it's it's not like beer plays a role throughout the Epic of Gilgamesh, but it shows up at this really pivotal moment that you just described. I like to highlight that, I mean, it's not like this is just a text that we happen to find really interesting and that has become famous in our world. This was famous in their world. This was a story that everyone knew and they were learning at school and everything. The fact that beer shows up at a real pivotal moment in one of the most important stories in the Mesopotamian world I think is really important. I think, like you said, it's not the only thing that transforms Enkidu into a sort of civilized human being so he can go into the city of Uruk, but it is one of a small number of things. And it appears alongside bread. So it's basically like the quintessential food and drink in Mesopotamia, bread and beer. So in order to become human, part of what he has to do is learn how to eat bread and drink beer. He also has to get cleaned up and shaved and clothed and things like that. So yes, the other thing that I find really interesting is there's a big question about the alcohol content of Mesopotamian beer. Many people have argued over the years that it might have been really low in alcohol content. I think it's possible that some of it was, but I also think when it shows up in Mesopotamian literature especially, it is a beverage that does things to people, you know, consistent with at least somewhat higher levels of alcohol. So in this pivotal moment, it doesn't just

transform I mean, Enkidu into a human being, it also has an effect on him, right? He like, we learn that he starts singing, his face lights up, his heart grows merry, his mood becomes free, right? So they, in that episode already, we see they're recognizing that drinking beer has an effect on you.

Lauren Dogaer

And I really like it that it's just written so blunt in all of these Mesopotamian sources, because we, of course, we do have a lot of, as you already mentioned, a lot of textual evidence from hymns to calculations, lexical lists, literary tales, and so on. But you are, of course, an archaeologist. So I would like to ask you to maybe shortly explain what material evidence we have in the archaeological record. I'm thinking about brewing and drinking vessels, how this can be distinguished from other household activities, such as cooking, for example. And in addition to the actual equipment, which kind of buildings do we have actual archaeological remains of? I'm thinking of taverns and breweries and so on.

Professor Tate Paulette

Yeah, great question. I mean, it's so one thing to just mention right away is you mentioned, you suggested like how do we tell this sort of brewing equipment apart from other household equipment? I mean, I think it's really tough. I think that's one of the things I try to point out in the book is that I think it's likely that we have excavated a lot of brewing equipment that we don't necessarily know was for brewing because it would be hard to distinguish because a lot of the things that you do in brewing look like just the same kind of things you do when cooking various things. So I think it's a big challenge. I mean, with organic residue analysis coming in, we will be able to do a much better and better job of identifying like this exact vessel was used for brewing or drinking beer. And we have some of that now, but what we have had to do up till now and will be continuing to do is especially trying to link up what we have in the written record with the archeological record because in these masses of cuneiform tablets that we have, there are lots of different terms for brewing equipment and also drinking equipment. I focused especially on the brewing equipment side. And it's actually a really difficult, because we have lots of terms, but also we have huge amounts of ceramics excavated by archaeologists. And so all different sorts of vessels. And so trying to establish a linkage between those The names for particular vessels and the actual vessels we excavate is not easy because you have to search for hints about what kind of vessels were these that they're talking about in the written record. And the one that people feel the most confident about, there's a number of different, quite a few different terms for these vessels, but they played a key role in brewing and they were vessels that had a hole in the base. which is actually really easy to identify archaeologically because you don't typically put a hole in the base of your vessel. And so that's where we feel the most confident, where we can say, yes, these vessels were a good chance they were

used in brewing. We don't know exactly what these vessels with a hole in the base were doing, whether they were functioning as a sort of filtering vessel or fermentation vessel or something else. But we know that they often talk about them as part of a pair. So you have this vessel with a hole in the base that sat above what was sometimes called a collecting or receiving vessel. And they like to talk about these two as a pair. And they like to talk about the pleasant sound that they made. There's this great example I love where this text says that they make a dooble-double sound. So like dooble-double, dooble-double, dooble-double. So like liquid sort of dripping or running out of one into the other. So we get those kind of hints. So I think that's the best case where when you find these vessels with a hole in the base archaeologically, there's a decent chance that you're dealing with brewing. Like there's a building excavated at the site of Tell Hadidi in Syria where an argument was made that it looks kind of like a house, but an argument was made that actually this might have been basically a brewery and there were lots of these vessels with a hole in the base recovered there by archaeologists. We also from a place called Tel-Bazi in Syria, they've actually done a good bit of residue analysis there. And they have examples of these vessels with a hole in the base that they say can actually demonstrate that they were using them to brew beer. So that's not the sort of brewing vessel side. The drinking vessel side, we have lots and lots of archeologically recovered vessels that you can certainly see were likely for drinking. We are starting to get residue analysis telling us these specific ones, like certain kinds of goblets or cups were used for that. And they give us the chance. Yeah, I mean, both of these, the brewing side and the drinking side, the archaeological evidence really gives us a chance to pin these things down in space and see like exactly where was brewing going on and where was drinking going on. We certainly, in the written record, we know all about different kinds of feasts and things that were happening, but we don't learn as much about what people were doing in their own homes, largely because a lot of the written record was being produced by scribes that were working for the palaces and the temples, so they weren't talking about what people were doing at home. But so if you can make an argument that a certain kind of vessel, I talked for example about these vessels called solid-footed goblets. If you can make an argument that those were probably used for drinking beer, then you can look at where those are found in houses and things and in what numbers. If there were a large number of these in a house, were they hosting some kind of their own little feasts and things? So the archeological record has the potential to really transform our ability to see sort of like where brewing and drinking were happening in urban space. I think we still have a long ways to go on that, but so let's see. Oh, you were asking about breweries. This leads into that, I guess. So it is an interesting thing because again, beer is all over the place in the written record and breweries appear quite a lot in the written record, but we have surprisingly few really solid examples of archeologically recovered buildings that might've been breweries. The best candidate and the best known is a building excavated at the site of Tell al-Hiba, the ancient city of Lagash, dating to the early dynastic period. And this is a

building that was located right next to a major temple, basically just separated by the little alleyway. In the book, I take us on a little sort of walking tour. I sort of take us back in time and we sort of walk in front of the temple and head down this alley and go into the brewery and have a look around. It's not certain that this is a brewery, but it seems like a pretty reasonable argument. There are various sorts of installations that would have been useful in a brewery. There are different vats of different kinds, different sorts of fireplaces, a huge oven. There is even a cuneiform tablet found in the building that actually mentions the word for brewery and a specific named brewer, and it looks like giving out beer to certain people. So I think it's a reasonable argument. I mean, then there's kind of like 3 levels of brewing at least going on here. We have these breweries, which are relatively large scale, often associated with a palace or a temple. And then we have taverns. There's a sort of hierarchy in terms of what we can get from the written record. We know a good bit about breweries in the written record, less about taverns because they were being managed by basically private individuals. And so they only really come into the written record when they're interfacing with the state, say, payment of taxes and things like that, or they show up in literature a lot. And then you have homebrewing, which we have hence to suggest that it was probably really pretty widespread. Probably most houses were doing this, but again, that barely shows up in the written record. It shows up, for example, we have some wonderful letters written back and forth between husbands and wives in what's called the old Assyrian period. And occasionally those letters, which are really about business transactions and things, but every once in a while you get little details about home life, about like brewing ingredients like bappir and things, showing that it seems like women were probably doing a lot of that brewing. So we have this one good example of a brewery and some other possible ones. Taverns, we have a few potential examples. Again, from this place, Tel-Bazi, an argument can be made that a few buildings that otherwise look kind of like houses seem like they had been divided up into a public and a private space. And in the public space, you have a big beer vessel right in the center where they could have been serving it. And then they also have argued based on residue analysis that most of the houses at this site were probably brewing their own beer also.

Lauren Dogaer

Yeah, I think it's really interesting to see that you can sort of reconstruct these different levels of like the household brewing, then the activities taking place in like state controlled breweries, taverns. I think, yeah, by looking all of this, this different kind of material, you can really make a whole picture of how beer was used in Mesopotamia. And I do have one very specific question. They used a straw to drink their beer. As a Belgian, that's just something that I cannot imagine to ever drink my beer with a straw, but in Mesopotamia they did. So could you tell us a little bit more about why they were using a straw? Because they were not, everyone had their own straw, but they were like drinking from one big cup. Why did not everyone simply have their own cup?

Professor Tate Paulette

Yes. I don't know if I can answer exactly why, but I think, and one thing to say is it definitely seems strange to many people to drink beer through a straw, but also there are quite a lot of still existing beverage traditions where people do drink from these communal vessels through straws. So we can sort of get a glimpse of it today and in recent history. I think the answer is probably there's a big difference between drinking out of your own individual vessel and then sharing in this more communal form of consumption. And I'm not sure that I know exactly beyond that why. The other argument that's been made is that it was more a functional reason that the beers needed to be filtered. We don't really know that. The only real evidence for that is that they were drinking through a straw. And so if you want to argue that that's what a straw was for, but I think the communal aspect also has to be considered a really important part of it. How do we know about this? I think strangely, to my knowledge, straws show up very, very rarely in the written record, which seems strange because in the artistic record, we have these wonderful banquet scenes, hundreds of them, especially from the early dynastic Akkadian period in the third millennium BC. And these show what are probably elite sort of banquets. with people sort of sitting up very upright on chairs and stools. Sometimes they're holding little cups or goblets, so they are sometimes drinking something out of individualized vessels, but then they are also often shown seated to either side of a larger vessel that's sitting on a stand of some kind and then has straws sticking up out of it with people drinking from the straws, sometimes other straws sticking out as if they're sort of waiting for other people to drink. You know, there could be between, sometimes there's one straw, there can be two straws, but up to as many as nine straws shown in these things. And so we have, at least from this, especially from this one time period, a really rich visual record of this particular kind of drinking. And these do show up archeologically, but so they show up, for example, as metal straws when in super fancy tombs, like they love to put drinking vessels of all different sorts in tombs. sometimes in very large numbers. And sometimes in fancy ones, they had really fancy metal straws, gold, silver, that kind of thing. But almost certainly most of these straws would have been made from reed, which was super abundant. in Mesopotamia and it doesn't survive well archaeologically, it's organic and so it disintegrates. But we have this wonderful bit of evidence, especially from in the vicinity of 2000 BC or so, which are little filter tips made out of metal that had been attached to the end of reed straws. So there are these little kind of finger length metal filters with little holes pierced in them that would have been attached to the end of the straw, the end of the reed, and then that would have been submerged down into the beer to act as the filter. And so they appear in various contexts, like at Tel-Bazi that we've talked about, they had some in a temple context, basically like there was a feast that happened in this kind of shrine, and there were some straws there. They have them in some houses, but they also come especially from a series of burials just after 2000 BC.

where they seem to usually occur as a single filter at the base of a vessel that was put in that burial. So almost certainly these people had been buried probably with a vessel with beer in it and a straw sticking out as part of the burial.

Lauren Dogaer

Fascinating that they were using these straws and these metal tips. Then to end our episode, there is just one final aspect that we haven't really touched upon yet, is whether there were any attempts at moderating all this alcohol usage and drinking of beer. Because of course, as in every ancient and modern civilization, Alcohol has positive and negative sides. And you already mentioned the nice effects that the beer had on Enkidu, that he starts to dance and gets very happy. And that's something that you can also see in a lot of the drinking songs. They're talking about the abundance of beer, how wonderful it makes them feel in a blissful mood and exhilarated and with joy in the heart and a happy liver is the phrase that very often comes back and we also find in other civilizations. So this sort of seems very positive, but do we also have any examples where they're like sort of warning people to maybe not overdo it? And I already had a little bit of a look at it myself, and I found that we have something of a cautionary tale in the story of the goddess Inanna, the goddess of love, and then the god Enki, sort of the creator god, and Enki actually ends up giving all of his powers to the goddess, because he got too drunk. So now I want to ask you to comment a little bit on that. And yeah, is this something of a warning? Like, hey, if you drink too much, your actions can actually have consequences, not only for you, but for the whole group. Is that something that we find in Mesopotamia?

Professor Tate Paulette

Yeah, I think exactly like you say, when they talk about how beer makes people feel, it's generally very positive. It's this very embodied kind of language about how it makes your body feel all these wonderful ways. But certainly there are also plenty, I think a decent number of examples of, yeah, what might be kind of like cautionary tales or at least a recognition that there were potential negative sides to alcohol consumption. I mean, beer consumption. You get others where you were mentioning this tale of Inanna and Enki where Enki, I can describe it a little, but I was gonna say that in other In some other things, Enki is actually kind of on the other side where we have him kind of maybe intentionally using beer to confuse people and get what he wants. So there is, you do get this sense that they recognize that beer could be used for sort of purposes of exploitation. You get also, there's a, they loved in the literary record, there was a kind of genre of debates where two people or gods or grain and sheep, members of the natural world, they get into a debate, an argument with each other about which one is the better. And in a number of cases, those debates start when those two sit down and start drinking beer together. So there was a recognition that drinking beer could lead to sort of like argument, competition. And that actually plays in, comes in in the tale of

Inana and Enki, where you have, this is a really interesting one. Unfortunately, you have a series of breaks in the text, but it's really interesting. You see basically at first we see Inanna getting herself all like dressed up really fancy. Definitely to go there with a purpose in mind, right? She's going to visit Enki and his underground sort of home and it's called the abzu. And she gets dressed up really fancy, but Enki also knows that she's coming. And so he's also preparing. And so he has his kind of minister prepare fancy food and drinks. And so she shows up and the two of them start drinking together. And that's what launches. Clearly, it launches a sort of competition, then we have a break in the text, so we don't know some of the details about what's going on, but when it comes back in, what we basically see is, yeah, Inky. So Enki was in control of a whole series of what are called me. It's a really difficult word to translate in Sumerian, but something it's often called like the arts of civilization. All of the things that made Mesopotamia what it was, they were each named separately and they were conceived of as these actual sort of powers that one could hold onto. And so Enki had a lot of these in his possession. And what we see is after they launched into this beer fueled competition, we come back in and we see him just giving these one after another to Inanna. And then we have another break and we basically have this wonderful little passage where it says, when the effects of the beer had cleared from Father Enki. So we see like him sort of waking up out of his drunken fog and his minister is standing there and he says, Wait a minute, where are all my powers? Where's all my stuff? And the minister just lists, he says, Well, you just gave them all to Inanna. And he's listing them off again. And so then Enki goes and tries to get them back. But yeah, so I think certainly at least the way I present this is this could be a sort of cautionary tale. I mean, this is about the consequences of alcohol consumption. Sure, we don't know if that's what the intention was here. But this is major consequences. This is the transferring over of a whole bunch of powers that were the most important things about Mesopotamian civilization from Enki to Inanna. So yeah, I think we have some of these different things. Like there's a really difficult text that people have interpreted in different ways called The Fowler's Wife, which might give us a different side of this, which is basically one interpretation is that it's showing us a man who's been out at the tavern. He drinks too much beer. He comes home and he's unable to perform for his wife in bed and she makes fun of him. And so we get other little things. There's like some, you just get little hints. We have some, You pointed out at the beginning a proverb that we have, there's a whole world of proverbs in Mesopotamia. There's also in this classic text called the instructions of Shirupak, where you have, it's framed as a father basically giving advice to his son. So it's a whole series of different pieces of advice. And one of those is you should not pass judgment when you drink beer. So there's this recognition that beer could cloud your judgment. so we don't have, as far as I know, explicit attempts to encourage moderation, but maybe these kind of cautionary tales.

Lauren Dogaer

Well, I think I'm happy to see that at least there was some sense of the fact that beer could cloud your judgment. Yeah, and I think this is also a very excellent way to conclude today's episode. I believe we have learned a lot about Mesopotamian history, why it is such an excellent region to study in ancient beer culture, and also that, well, recreating Sumerian beer is apparently a lot of fun. So thank you very much, Tate. It was a pleasure to get drunk on Mesopotamian history with you.

Professor Tate Paulette

You're welcome. Thanks for having me.

Lauren Dogaer

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.