

PalArch's Journal of Archaeology
of Egypt / Egyptology

Beer and its socio- cultural and religious importance in Ancient Egypt

Sanchayita Khakholar

PhD Research Scholar, Department of History, Gauhati University, Assam, India

Sanchayita Khakholar. Beer and its socio- cultural and religious importance in Ancient Egypt--Palarch's Journal Of Archaeology Of Egypt/Egyptology 17(7), 14382-14386. ISSN 1567-214x

Keywords: Beer, Ancient Egypt, alcohol, culture, society, religion.

Abstract

Alcohol and culture in different parts of the world have played parallel roles. Since the ancient times, we see patterns of alcohol use which clearly stands for the same. In ancient Egypt, alcohol, especially, Beer had an extensive part in the societal activities, not just in ceremonies and certain special occasions, beer was in fact used by the people on a daily basis, it is also said that 'they would drink beer, than water'. In this article the social cultural and religious, aspects of beer drinking patterns is observed.

Introduction

While in many cultures 'drinking' of alcoholic beverages is believed to be a sin, in many more cultures, the use of alcohol, becomes an innate part of their social, cultural and even religious, life. Alcohol and culture intermingles in many societies; the pattern of its use is mentioned in many sources with finite details, and these express the use of alcoholic beverages in socio-cultural context. Even though in few societies, the importance and use of alcohol is tabooed, it is not ignored (Mandelbaum).

Among all alcoholic beverages, one which has been extremely popular in varied societies in different parts of the world is 'Beer'. Apart from being an important, principal and extensively used beverage in today's age, Beer drinking and the

knowledge of its brewing can be traced back to the oldest civilisations of human beings. In spite of the ongoing debate on ‘which came first? Beer or agriculture?’ it is undeniable that people since ancient times, did have knowledge of brewing beer from cereals, like Barley, rice etc. The debate starts with the unravelling of archaeological evidence of beer brewing by Natufians, belonging to hunting gathering group, who lived in eastern Mediterranean. Beer residues were found in stone mortars in Raqefet cave in Israel, which brings forward one question to the curious minds, did Beer ignite the need of agriculture. Patrick McGovern a bio molecular archaeologist strongly stands with the view of alcohol being the initiating factor for agriculture. However, John F. Gretton provides another view, according to him, Beer made out of cereal cannot have existed before cultivation (Gretton). Whatever the actual fact might be, it is for sure that the knowledge of beer brewing and beer drinking has been in existence since ancient times.

Beer brewing is often, traced back to the time of the Sumerians, but the Egyptians are believed to have perfected the drink. The beer made by the Mesopotamians was thick, the Egyptians seem to have modified the technique of brewing and is believed to have made it lighter, smoother. To Egyptians beer, irrespective of gender and social status, was a staple to the diet just as bread. In fact, beer was more popular than wine, as wine seem to have been confined to the ones of the higher status, Beer reached out to all. Beer was drunk by all daily, however, the stronger ones, were saved for special and sacred times. It was accepted that drinking Beer was way safer than drinking water; thus, drinking of beer was done as a refreshing drinks or to provide one with nutrition. Thus, beer was observed more as a nutritional drink.

Traditionally the study of beer in society has been recorded in artistic records, such as statuettes, paintings and reliefs on tombs, one even get to notice the beer brewing ancient process. It was produced from cereals like, barley, wheat, rice, however, John F. Gretton was of the view that wheat did not grow wild in Egypt but was imported from Asia in later period (Gretton 357). However, the brewing process of the beer is quite a topic of debate, since 3000 years span of Egyptian civilisation the techniques might have changed, because even though, brewing scenes were available, according to Delwen Samuel, the techniques is difficult to be precisely known. However, the use of malt that was debated is believed by Delwen to be a key process in Beer brewing, however, some cereals, may have been malted, while some other may not have been, but it is quite sure that, one kind of cereal was used for one purpose while the other for other purpose, for e.g., one type of cereal was used for funerary offerings, while other for daily consumption (Samuel 9). From Sweet, sparkling to spice Beer, John F Gretton, lists us with a variety of beer that was used in ancient Egypt, he says, there existed a variety of beer. “It was made in mash tubs of barley steeped in water and raised by fermented crushers”, says G Maspero, explaining the technique in his work *A sketch from life in an Egyptian city*, “when freshly made it is soft and pleasant but easily disturbed and turns sour”.

The social importance of the drink cannot be ignored, as it was drunken people of all social stature starting from the king (Pharaohs), landowners, and merchants to peasants and slaves, even children from a very young age of 2-3 seem to have had access to drinking of beer. Thus, drinking of Beer was not tabooed, but was rather embedded in social cultural aspects of life. The significance of Beer in the Egyptian society comes forward with the brief understanding of their ancient Egyptian religion, where they have connected this drink as a symbol of peace and love and made offerings to god in form of beer.

Osiris in ancient Egyptian religion was the Lord of fertility and afterlife, who brought to them the art of agriculture. Along with agriculture, Osiris, gifted them with the art of making Beer. In the famous story of 'The Destruction of mankind', which dates back to the period of New kingdom, i.e., c. 1500 to 1069 BCE, god Ra, was tired of mankind, as they started to plot against the old god, and he decides to end humanity. So, he summons, Sekhmet to destroy humans, rip them into parts. When Sekhmet started with her destruction her blood thirst kept growing, however, soon, Ra takes pity of the humans, and calls her back, but her wrath seemed impossible to contain, hence Ra ordered 7000 jars of beer to be prepared, dyed red and was delivered in Dendera. The Goddess finds the beer, thinking of it as blood, drinks it and falls asleep, when the goddess wakes up, she wakes up as the most humble and gentle loving friend of humanity, goddess Hathor. Ever since, the Tekh festival or the festival of drunkenness is celebrated, to commemorate joy, love and music. This festival was celebrated every 20th day of Thoth which is the first month according to the calendar of ancient Egyptians. The celebration took place at temples and at homes of the common people. Here, they drank beer as much as they can and fell asleep, and at temples they would be woken up at the sounds of drums beating again and then worship goddess Hathor. A fascinating fact enclosing this festival is this social event was seen something sacred and not a gathering for social drinking. Drinking of Beer was accompanied with dancing singing and many scholars believe that it was also accompanied with sexual activity. This story of destruction is found in the Book of Heavenly cow an ancient Egyptian text written during the middle kingdom.

The Egyptian people used to offer beer and bread to gods and pharaohs and to gods, so much of the drink was offered to please the gods. Even temples used to brew their own beer. Unlike the Greek gods, almost all of the Egyptian gods were drinkers of alcohol in their mythology. Although it reached out to sections of all stature, hierarchy still remained on what drink was available for drinking, like for the pharaohs and upper stratum people, they were provided with the best ones. The most common beer was sweet ale and the lighter ones were prepared for special occasions. Earlier, women used to brew beer, but later, men took over this job. The ceramic vessels were used for fermenting, its interior is porous and perfect for the yeast culture to grow, it is also to note that sometimes straws basically invented by the Sumerians were used. During the time of old kingdom it was brewed by using cooked loaves of bread in water and then fermented in jar, use of hops and the process of Carbonation was not known and to modern day people it would taste more like a fruit beer (mark). By new kingdom, Enmer

wheat was used it was mashed and was heated to ferment it. Since middle kingdom it turned into an industry; started to be produced in large scale.

The Egyptians believed in the idea of after life, for the departed soul they would offer or place food and beer and even wine by the sides of the tomb. After the funeral the beer would be provided to their families and people.

Alcohol use patterns are very much necessary to understand the importance of it in human societies, often when scholars study on the patterns and use of alcohol, the analysis leads them to mostly to limits and the affects of it but many scholars today are trying to understand the close relationship alcohols; in this study ‘beer’ plays in the lives of the people of different societies, like Egyptian society where beer and wine are embedded in the socio- cultural and religious ideologues, there are many societies that have showed similar connections. And in the lives of ancient Egyptians, unlike wine, beer appears to be in regular use of all people. In occasion’s celebrations, offerings and even in sacrifices it seems to have been extensively produced and used. Beer was also used as medicines, not just in present times does the belief that beer helps in indigestion, constipation, it was even in ancient Egypt that olive mixed with beer is was believed to have cured the same. Although, the techniques of beer brewing is often debated on but it is undeniable for the scholars to not accept the socio cultural and religious strings attached to this drink.

References

- Gretton, John F. "The History of beer." Journal of institute of brewing vol 35 issue 4 (1929).
- Mandelbaum, David. "Alcohol and culture." Current Anthropology vol 3 (1965): 281.
- mark, joshua. ancient history.
- Samuel, Delwen. "Archeology of Ancient Egyptian Beer." Journal of American society of Brewing chemists 54 (1996).
- witte, Mellise De. Stanford News. 12 9 2018. <<https://news.stanford.edu/press-releases/2018/09/12/crafting-beer-lereal-cultivation/#:~:text=September%2012%2C%202018-,An%20ancient%20thirst%20for%20beer%20may%20have%20inspired%20agriculture%2C%20Stanford,underlying%20motivation%20to%20cultivate%20cerea>>.
- Marks, Tasha. “A sip of history: ancient Egyptian Beer”. 25 5 2018. <https://blog.britishmuseum.org/a-sip-of-history-ancient-egyptian-beer/#:~:text=The%20culture,at%20religious%20festivals%20and%20celebrations>.
- Bumbar, Micky. “Beer wine and Drinking Goda the foundation of Ancient Egypt”. 30 12 2017. <https://lordsofthedrinks.com/2017/12/30/beer-wine-and-drinking-gods-the-foundation-of-ancient-egypt/>

Hussain Amr and Mehdawy Magda. “ The Pharaoh’s Kitchen: Recipes from Ancient Egypt’s Enduring Food Traditions”. American university in Cairo press(2010).