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Divine or Godless Drinks?

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DIVINE OR GODLESS DRINK?
ANCIENT GREEK NOTIONS
CONCERNING THE ORIGINS OF BEER AND WINE

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The average person today, if asked, would probably place the origins of beer in Egypt or the Near East. Indeed beer residue has been identified in vessels from both Iran and Egypt dating to the mid to late fourth millennium B.C., but recently such finds have also been claimed for Scotland, among other places.¹ In all probability, beer was produced independently in various places, and long before the fourth millennium B.C. Though agriculture and pottery (which are nearly unanimously acknowledged to have been first developed in the Near East) no doubt made possible widespread beer-making, it is certain that beer could be made, and probably was made, without these technologies, with the use, for instance, of wild cereals and other types of containers (of leather, textile, wood, stone, etc.). A similar case could also be made for the origins of wine; although viticulture may have developed somewhere in the Near East and this technology greatly facilitated the making of wine, in all likelihood wine was being made by various peoples long before from wild grapes (and other fruits) during the highly experimental Neolithic Age.²

In this paper, however, I am not interested in the reality of the origins of beer or wine, a question which is at the same time among the most popular and the one least able to be answered with certainty because of our complete lack of early evidence. Rather my focus will be on the notions concerning the origins, both of beer and wine, in ancient Greece. As we will see it was mainly through stories concerning Dionysus, the god of intoxication, that Greeks expressed their notions about the origins of intoxicants, and these stories tell us much more

¹ See now Max Nelson, *The Barbarian's Beverage: A History of Beer in Ancient Europe* (London and New York 2005), 9-13 for a summary of the evidence in the East and West. More evidence is constantly being put forward, including finds in Spain and China. The conference proceedings for the *International Congress on Beer in Prehistory and Antiquity* (Barcelona 2004) which will appear through British Archaeological Reports in 2005 will include much of the newest research in this area. See now the summary of my views in Steve Farrar, "Europeans First to Get Beer In." *The Times Higher Education Supplement* (Oct. 8, 2004) 9.

² For the origins of viticulture and wine-making, see especially Patrick McGovern, S. J. Fleming, and S. H. Katz, eds. *The Origins and Ancient History of Wine* (Philadelphia 1996) and Patrick McGovern, *Ancient Wine: The Search for the Origins of Viniculture* (Princeton 2003). For beer in the Neolithic, see now Merryn Dineley, *Barley, Malt and Ale in the Neolithic* (Oxford 2004).

about ancient perceptions of drinking than of the realities concerning the origins of beverages.

To begin with, it is interesting that the ancient Greeks, as far as we know, never explicitly placed the origins of beer or wine in the Near East, in Mesopotamia or neighbouring lands. Egypt, however, was a favourite choice to place the origins of various things, including intoxicants.³ The third century A.D. scholar Athenaeus related different traditions concerning the discovery of the vine, that it was first found in Olympia in Greece or in Plinthine in Egypt.⁴ He adds that, according to the first century B.C. philosopher Dio the Academic, beer was developed at a later time in Egypt as a drink for the poor who could not afford wine.⁵ However, an anonymous ancient Greek scholar rather said that the Egyptians discovered beer before wine was discovered.⁶

If there was some debate about the place where beer and wine were discovered and the sequence of discoveries, there was in general little hesitation in attributing the discovery of wine, and occasionally also beer, to the god Dionysus. The first century B.C. historian Diodorus of Sicily said that Dionysus discovered wine and taught the cultivation of the vine and the making of wine to mankind, and that he also discovered beer and taught its making to those who lived in areas where vines could not be grown.⁷ No story survives concerning how beer was discovered by the god but there exist a number of stories concerning how he discovered wine. The late fifth and early sixth century A.D. poet Nonnus, who wrote the longest ancient Greek epic poem, one that revolves around the exploits of Dionysus, cites two stories. In the first, Dionysus's best friend, a young satyr named Ampelus, is killed when he tries unsuccessfully to ride a bull. His body is then turned into the grapevine, from which Dionysus discovers wine when pressing the ripened fruit.⁸ Interestingly, Dionysus here knows nothing about beer, and is even made to say that no drink similar to wine could be made from cereal.⁹ In the second story cited by Nonnus, it is due to ichor (the substance, analogous

³ See, for instance, the numerous stories collected in Hdt., 2.

⁴ Athen., *Deipn.* 1.34a (epitome), citing Theop., *FGrH* 115F277 (on Olympia) and Hellan., *FGrH* 4F175 (on Plinthine). In another tradition, Dionysus was said to have brought the vine from the Red Sea to Greece (Philonides in Athen., *Deipn.* 15.675a).

⁵ Athen., *Deipn.* 1.34b (epitome), probably citing Dio the Academic's *Symposium* (see further Nelson 2005: 67-68 and 147).

⁶ *Schol. in Aesch. Suppl.* 953. In some ancient sources it is claimed that mead was known before wine (Plut., *Quaest. conv.* 4.6.2 [= *Mor.* 672b] and Porph., *De antr. nymph.* 16, citing Orph., fr. 154 Kern).

⁷ Diod. Sic., *Hist.* 1.15.8, 1.17.1, 3.63.3-4, 3.70.8, 4.2.5, 5.75.4, and 5.79.1 (on wine) and 1.20.4, 3.73.6, and 4.2.5 (on beer). At one point Dionysus is also said to have taught mankind the cultivation of cereal (1.17.1), but ordinarily this was attributed to Demeter and connected to bread-making not beer-making, even elsewhere in Diodorus (see 5.68-69 and 5.77.4). For more on Dionysus as a beer god, see Nelson 2005: 27-31.

⁸ Ampelus's death is narrated in Nonn., *Dion.* 11 and his transformation in 12. The Roman poet Ovid (*Fast.* 3.409-414), probably using a lost Greek source, says rather that Dionysus placed the grapevine upon Ampelus.

⁹ Nonn., *Dion.* 12.210 and 254-255.

to blood, which was said to course through the bodies of the gods) which has dripped down from Olympus and created a wild vine, the properties of which are discovered by Dionysus when he finds a snake that has drunk from the intoxicating grapes.¹⁰

Many of the stories about Dionysus revolve around his introduction of wine to mankind and his battles with those who would not accept him or his rites. The greater part of Nonnus's poem goes on to recount the campaign of Dionysus against the Indians and other eastern peoples because of their injustice and impiety; in the end he teaches them his rites as well as the making of wine (though, interestingly, the Indians are not historically famous as wine-drinkers).¹¹ Dionysus also fights against such impious individuals as Kings Pentheus and Lycurgus.¹²

Perhaps the story concerning Dionysus's travels that has occasioned the most confusion is one preserved in the work of the early third century A.D. Christian author Sextus Julius Africanus. While discussing the wonders of agriculture he writes:¹³

Those who do not possess vines and are not able to profit from the fruit of this plant have imitated wine from other things, either from seeds or by a preparation from fruits or by a combination of roots, since they refuse to drink pure water. The Egyptians drink *zithos*, the Paonians *kamon*, the Celts *kerbēsia*, the Babylonians *sikera*. For Dionysus, being angry, abandoned them and did not give them the art of viticulture, reserving for the Greek farmers alone the triumphs.

At first Africanus seems to follow the sort of explanation found in Diodorus of Sicily, and mentioned above, that beer was used by those (including Babylonians, only here mentioned as beer drinkers in ancient western literature)

¹⁰ Nonn., *Dion.* 12.292-393. For other stories of the origins of the vine involving Orestheus rather than Dionysus, see Marcel Detienne, *Dionysos at Large*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge and London 1989), 33-34.

¹¹ Nonn., *Dion.* 13-43. The tradition that Dionysus introduced wine to India is also found in Diod. Sic., *Hist.* 2.38.5, 3.63.3-5, and 4.3.1-2 (and see 1.19.7) and Arr., *Ind.* 7.5. Lucian (*Nigr.* 5) says that Indians were driven insane when they first tried wine. Polyaeus (*Strat.* 1.1) rather says that Dionysus won against the Indians in part by giving them wine. See now the very readable account of Dionysus's adventures in the East in Andrew Dalby, *Bacchus: A Biography* (London and Los Angeles 2003), 65-79. For references to Indian beer in classical literature, see Max Nelson, "The Cultural Construction of Beer among Greeks and Romans." *Syllecta Classica* 14 (2003)101-120, at 102, n. 6.

¹² Nonn., *Dion.* 44-46 (on Pentheus) and 20-21 (on Lycurgus). Both are connected in, among others, Diod. Sic., *Hist.* 4.3.4, who also connects them with the Indian King Myrrhanus (3.64.2-4). The story of Lycurgus is already found in Homer (*Il.* 6.130-140) and was made into a tetralogy by Aeschylus (see Nelson 2005: 25-28) while that of Pentheus is best known from Euripides's *Bacchae*. Some have suggested that Dionysus's travels from the East to the West (as found in Euripides) paralleled the actual route of viticulture (see now, for instance, McGovern 2003: 4 and 240-246).

¹³ Jul. Afr., *Cesti* 1.19.17-23 Vieillefond (ἄσοι δὲ ἀμπέλους οὐκ ἔχουσιν, οὐδὲ τὸν ἀπὸ τῶνδε τῶν φυτῶν εὐτυχῆκασι καρπὸν, ἐμμήσαντο οἶνον ἐτέρων ἢ σπερμάτων ἢ ἀκροδρύων σκευασία ἢ ῥιζῶν συνθέσει, τὴν καθαροῦ ὕδατος πόσιν παραιτούμενοι. πίνουσι γοῦν ζῦθον Αἰγύπτιοι, κάμον Πάιοι, Κελτοὶ κερβησίαν, σίκερα Βαβυλωνίαι. Διόνυσος γὰρ αὐτοὺς κατέλιπεν ὠργισμένος καὶ οὐδὲν ἐκείνοις ἀμπελουργίας ἐδωρήσατο, μόνοις τὰ ἐπινίκια γεωργοῖς Ἑλλησι τηρῶν). The translation is my own (see Nelson 2005: 74).

who lived in areas where vines could not grow.¹⁴ However, unlike the account in Diodorus, here Dionysus is not the one who teaches the making of beer. Rather, certain people evidently came up with the idea of making beer since Dionysus did not teach them viticulture.

That this is what Africanus meant has often been misunderstood. The well-respected French assyriologist Jean Bottéro, paraphrasing Africanus, wrote: "Dionysus, god of wine, angered at the Babylonians because of their stubbornness in drinking only beer, did not wish to stay among them and to teach them the cultivation of the vine and the making of wine."¹⁵ This misreading in fact can be traced back at least fifty years and has often been perpetuated since.¹⁶ Clearly, however, Dionysus is not angry because the natives have beer; rather, because he is angry, he does not give them wine, forcing them to drink only beer. This is clear from the fact that the context of the whole passage is the notion of climatic constraints in the making of wine.

This leads us to ponder why Dionysus was angry at the Babylonians and other beer-drinkers to begin with. It was the impiety of the Indians and others who did not recognize him as a god that made Dionysus campaign against them, as we have seen. However, he solved this by introducing them to wine, not abandoning

¹⁴ For this notion, found in numerous ancient authors (Greek and Roman), see Nelson 2005: 40-41 (Herodotus), 48 (Posidonius), 54 (Isidore of Seville), 64 (Pytheas), 80 (Tacitus), and 149 (Cassius Dio and Servius). Plutarch (*Quaest. conv.* 3.2 [= *Mor.* 648e]) even compares the drinking of beer when wine is not available to the use of ivy as a symbol of Dionysus when the vine is not available during the winter. For a comparison of the accounts of Diodorus and Africanus, see Nelson 2005: 28.

¹⁵ Jean Bottéro, "Le vin dans une civilisation de la bière: la Mésopotamie." in Oswyn Murray and Manuela Tecuşan, eds. *In Vino Veritas* (London 1995), 21-34, at 21: "... Dionysos, dieu du vin, en colère contre les Babyloniens à cause de leur entêtement à boire que de la bière, n'avait pas voulu demeurer chez eux et leur apprendre à cultiver la vigne et à faire le vin." The translation is my own.

¹⁶ Patrick McGovern (who cites the story at 2003: 149) has helped me track down this misreading to R. J. Forbes, "Chemical, Culinary, and Cosmetic Arts." in Charles Singer, et al., eds., *A History of Technology* (New York and London 1954), vol. 1, 238-298, at 282 (citing no source): "In Greek tradition, Dionysos, god of wine, fled from Mesopotamia in disgust because its inhabitants were addicted to beer." Forbes is cited for this story in William Younger, *Gods, Men and Wine* (London 1966), 55, who says: "There was a story in the Greek world that Dionysos fled from Mesopotamia because the Mesopotamians drank beer." Other examples include: Edward Hyams, *Dionysus: A Social History of the Wine Vine* (New York 1965), 37 ("Dionysus, or at all events that god under an earlier name, in an earlier avatar, was said to have turned away from the land of the Two Rivers in anger because the inhabitants preferred to drink beer"), who cites no sources and does not correct this in his second edition of 1987; Andrew Sherratt, "Cups that Cheered." in William H. Waldren and Rex Claire Kennard, eds., *Bell Beakers of the Western Mediterranean: Definition, Interpretation, Theory, and New Site Data* (Oxford 1987), 81-114, at 94 ("The god Dionysus was said to have fled to Greece from Mesopotamia in disgust at its inhabitants' liking for beer"), citing no source; Tim Unwin, *Wine and the Vine: An Historical Geography of Viticulture and the Wine Trade* (London and New York 1991), 87 ("... there was a Greek tradition that Dionysus turned away from Mesopotamia because its inhabitants preferred beer..."), citing Hyams and Younger; and Ian S. Hornsey, *A History of Beer and Brewing* (Cambridge 2003), 33 ("This [i.e. Diodorus attributing the invention of beer to Dionysus] is at variance with the legend that suggests that Dionysus fled Mesopotamia in disgust at its inhabitants' liking for beer!"), citing no source.

them altogether to their own devices. Evidently we are dealing with a story not known to us from other sources, and likely one invented by Africanus himself (and even he may have been unsure of the cause of Dionysus's wrath). But the idea that beer was antithetical to Dionysus is certainly not one just found here. In fact in the early fifth century B.C. playwright Aeschylus, Lycurgus, who does not accept Dionysus or wine, is said to drink beer, it seems, but, again as in Africanus, presumably Dionysus is not angry at him because he drinks beer but because he does not accept wine (and Dionysus's rites).¹⁷ And so beer in Aeschylus and Africanus, unlike the account in Diodorus, is not considered Dionysus's appropriate drink, but wine alone is thought congenial to the god. The fourth century A.D. Emperor Julian even wrote a comic epigram on the subject, noting that beer was not a fitting drink for the true Dionysus.¹⁸ Thus among certain ancient authors beer, unlike wine, could be denied as a divine gift, making it nothing more than a man-made beverage. This idea is, not surprisingly, quite prevalent among late antique Christian authors,¹⁹ but is a notion already found in the third century B.C. botanist Theophrastus, who spoke of beer as the product of a substance's departure from nature occurring due to human intervention.²⁰

In these accounts then we can see that the desire to pinpoint the origins of cultivation and the creation of intoxicants to one place and time are not new, and though today we have at our disposal numerous scientific and anthropological means of discovering such origins, the ancient Greeks relied mainly on pious myths. These myths act for us less as windows into the pre-classical past than as mirrors exposing the conceptions and concerns of the very ones recounting them. Since wine was the sole intoxicant used by the Greeks, they were happy to find stories that the vine was native to Greece or that the god Dionysus taught the Greeks viticulture because he favoured them. Other stories of the origin of wine were meant to account for the well-disseminated notion among Greeks that they owed much of their civilization to the Egyptians. Even more telling are the stories concerning the origins of beer, a beverage avoided by the Greeks.²¹ If it was thought of as a divine gift, beer was considered one secondary to wine which people living in places not suited for the vine would be forced to produce as their main intoxicant. If the drinking of beer was not thought to be environmentally determined it was rather conceived to be determined by the poverty of the drinkers or perhaps even their impiety. Indeed the Greeks had to search out and even

¹⁷ Aesch., fr. 124 Radt, from Athen., *Deipn.* 10.447c.

¹⁸ Jul., *Epigr.* 1 Page in *Anth. Pal.* 9.368; see further on this epigram Nelson 2005: 30-31.

¹⁹ Thus, for instance, the late fourth and early fifth century A.D. Theodoret (*Comm. in Isaiam* 6.284-285 Guinot) wrote: "Beer is an invented beverage, not a natural one" (πόμεν ἐστὶν ὁ ζῦθος ἐπινενοημένον, οὐ φυσικόν). Similarly, the seventh century A.D. medical author Paulus of Aegina (*Epit. med.* 7.3.6.9) characterized beer (ζῦθος) as "man-made" (σύνθετος). Many later sources could also be cited; see further Nelson 2003: 113 and n. 58.

²⁰ Theophr., *De caus. plant.* 6.11.2.

²¹ For possible reasons for this avoidance, see Nelson 2005: 33-37.

invent reasons why people would drink this cereal-based beverage rather than wine, since such behaviour no doubt seemed to them distressingly irrational. Theirs was a divine drink, while that of others was at best a poor substitute, at worst godless.