First sips of beer
Archaeology and history of "beer''.

International colloquium
Saverne, June 5 to 8, 2023

Together with the revival of craft beer production in the United States and Europe, recent discoveries - such as the Abydos brewery in Egypt from the first dynasty - and advances in ancient beers around the world prompt us to invite researchers to present their latest findings and hypotheses on this drink. What are the earliest traces of beer and how was it made? How important was it among ancient peoples? Is there only one definition of beer?

These are some of the questions that this symposium will attempt to answer, with an emphasis on unpublished papers and an open, exploratory approach. A poster session is planned.

Session 1
From raw materials to fermented beverages; preparation and processing in different cultural areas (Europe, Americas, East, Africa)

Beer, a drink that is widespread throughout the world, has the constant characteristic of coming from a plant rich in starch, transformed by the action of ferments into an alcoholic drink. The variety of species used (cereals, fruits, tubers, etc.) is impressive, as are the various skills used by the brewers. The different beer-making processes are illustrated by specific operating chains, which have an effect on the raw materials used (heating of the grain, steeping, use of yeast, etc.).

In this first session, the aim will be to propose a general cartography of the types of brewing known throughout the world while focusing on the presentation of current archaeological knowledge on the ingredients of beer and the manufacturing processes. The phases of preparation will also be considered, from the choice of plants used to the methods of fermentation. The materials added to the beer in addition to the basic ingredient can be discussed, as can the essential ingredient water.

As beer is often inseparable from its environment, the aim will be to reflect on the regions (North Alpine, Mediterranean domains) and the specific or non-specific places where it is made, as well as on the tools used by the brewers. The domestic and wider contexts will be presented with archaeological and ethnographic examples, with an emphasis on recent discoveries and works. Emphasis will be placed on the tools and their use in order to examine specific productions such as ceremonial beers.

Session 2
The identification of beer in archaeological contexts

Since the increase in analytical chemistry work in the 1990s (Richard Evershed et al. 1990), there has been an increase in publications on the subject, as well as synthesis work (Patrick McGovern 2009, among others). The identification of beer remains in vessels from various archaeological contexts calls for various methods, such as the observation of enzymatic attacks on starch granules, the identification of yeasts or ancient lactic bacteria indicating fermentation. In parallel, the analysis of paleo-ecological indicators such as pollens or diatom frustules allows us to learn more about the water or materials used to make a fermented drink.

Current research, such as the work of Andreas G. Heiss and his colleagues, illustrates the use of experiments and the possibilities of high-resolution microscopes (identification of reduced thicknesses for malted barley grains) to identify traces of beer. Other tools such as chromatographs and spectrometers are available to researchers to identify different markers by combining techniques (e.g. gas chromatography with mass spectrometry).
In-depth studies of the size and shape of the vessels as well as their probable uses complete the observations, whether in an archaeological or ethnological context. Ethnoarchaeology is a good way to identify manufacturing processes while following materials and tools over the long term.

Session 3
Drinking beer
Strongly linked to the practices of commensality and conviviality, beer has its place as an everyday drink, but also during festivities. Produced from the transformation of the vital resources of the populations (cereals, fruits, tubers, etc.), beers are then consumed in different ways over time, while often being offered to the deities. Beer is also linked to notions of terroir and identity and the neighbour's beer sometimes seems attractive or to be rejected. Mainly associated with barbarian populations, it seems to have been synonymous with festivity, drunkenness and a return to the primitive state since European antiquity.

From the written and iconographic documents that give us a plethora of information on the manufacture and consumption of Mesopotamian beer to the Latin authors who warn us against the drunkenness procured by this vicious beverage, the third session will address, through written testimonies, oral attestations and artefacts, the ways in which this drink was consumed. We will focus on the portrait of this liquid in different cultures. Political meetings, diplomatic or warlike contracts, and festive exchanges will be among the themes we will deal with, without forgetting to address the taboos and rules governing beer consumption.

Session 4
Beer today: production, consumption, experimentation
Generally with a lower alcohol content than wine, beer today, aided by attractive flavours, is mainly associated with youth and celebration. Easily accessible and consumable, beer is now easily made. Having emerged from the shadows of industrial laboratories, this drink is now within the reach of many amateurs thanks to easy access to tools and raw materials supported by tutorials for brewing. There is no shortage of customisable solutions which are reflected in the plethora of craft beers on offer.

Once the beer has been produced, it must be drunk, but how? This session will focus on ways of drinking across societies and time. Whether festive or everyday, drinking practices are strongly linked to commensality and can change and evolve according to the moment and the context. Is the relationship to beer the same whether one shares an Amerindian chicha or a Czech Pilsner?

From a sensory point of view, how is the taste of beer perceived in different societies? Is the neighbour's beer attractive or disgusting?

In this session we will explore the ways in which this drink has become established in Western societies through the paths taken by industrial and craft brewers, not forgetting the amateur brewers, aided by an important visual. The economic context (development of the "do it yourself") and the social exploration (changes in the status of consumers) will be among the themes addressed. We will also try to paint a picture of modern and contemporary consumers.

New consumption practices in short circuits, as well as communication between craft beer lovers, will be addressed (social networks, blogs, etc.).