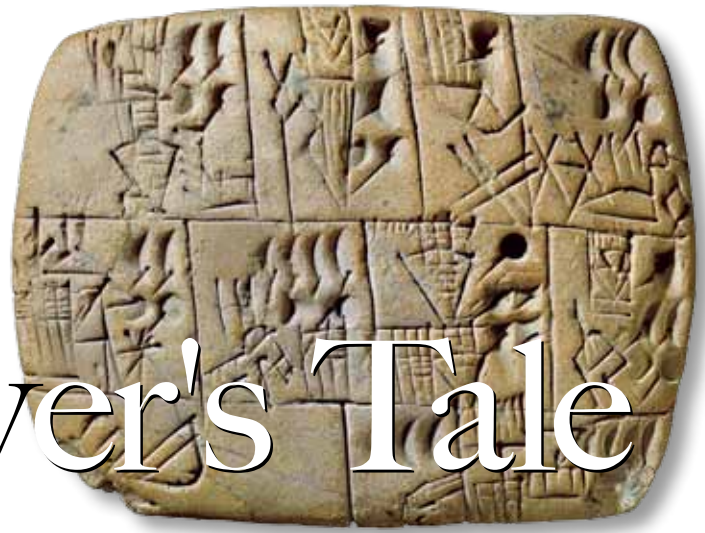


**RIGHT** A proto-cuneiform tablet recording the making of beer, probably from southern Iraq, and dating to the Late Prehistoric period, 3100-3000 BC.



# The Brewer's Tale

Raising a glass to celebrate the festive season, **Andrew Robinson** reviews a book that recounts a very particular way of recording the history of the world: through beer.

**F**ermentation is 'controlled rot', writes William Bostwick in *The Brewer's Tale*. Making beer is 'a delicate dance between cultivating the right kind of bacteria and keeping the wrong kind at bay'. Moreover brewing, throughout its history, has always been 'a balance of taste with *terroir*'. That is, the special characteristics of a place - its geography, geology and climate - which uniquely flavour its agricultural products. For example, the quality of lager (from the German lager, meaning 'to store') was originally derived from the fact that the Bavarian brew, freshly prepared after the autumn harvest of hops and grain, was stored in barrels throughout the winter in a network of chilly limestone caves, and then tapped to celebrate the spring thaw.

Bostwick's *terroir*, so to speak, is that of a professional writer on beer for American publications, including the *Wall Street Journal*; a zealous advocate of diversity in beer production against the standardised products of the big brands like Budweiser; and a dedicated home brewer, who lives in an apartment in San Francisco, a centre of craft brewing. It flavours every page of his effervescent book, as he delves into the history of beer from earliest times to the present day, while recounting his domestic attempts - with widely varying success - to brew everything from grain-based ancient Mesopotamian beer described in cuneiform documents to an undrinkable molasses-based recipe for 'Small Beer' jotted down by George Washington in 1757.

In eight, easily imbibable, chapters, Bostwick explores: 'The Babylonian servant brewing liquid daily bread for the empire-building masses; the Nordic shaman, keeper of herb-infused portals into the spirit world; the monk, fuelling his brothers' Lenten fasts; the farmer, turning the dregs of harvest into rustic refreshment; the London industrialists, whose factories churned out dark, rich porters and high-class sparkling pale ales; the first American settlers, making do with pumpkins and parsnips; and finally their heirs the German immigrants bringing lager to a thirsty nation [i.e., the United States] and the admen taking beer into the modern age.'

Considering only the book's archaeology, it appears probable that beer production dates back to the first cultivation of wheat and barley more than 10,000 years ago in the Fertile Crescent. Neolithic drinkers no doubt enjoyed being under the influence of alcohol, as we moderns do. As important to them, though, must have been the nutritious value of beer, plus the fact that it was cleaner than water despite its unfiltered appearance. Whereas

the taste of contaminated water can easily fool a thirsty person, contaminated beer tastes too bad to drink. As long as beer's taste was good, ancient Babylonians were happy to strain out its detritus with their bushy beards and moustaches, according to an ancient Greek joke.

The earliest known European brewery belongs to about 3000 BC in the village of Skara Brae in the Orkney Islands, off the north coast of Scotland. Around the same time in ancient Egypt, the brewery at Hierakonpolis was capable of churning out 300 gallons per day. In the tomb of the pharaoh Scorpion I at Abydos, known as U-j, dated to around 3150 BC, residues suggest that it was probably stocked with jugs of sorghum beer flavoured with grapes and herbs.

From Mesopotamia come the earliest written references to beer. Five-thousand-year-old Sumerian clay tablets in a proto-cuneiform script enumerate quantities of barley and malt used in the production of eight different kinds of beer, which was stored in jars. Both the barley and the jars are inscribed in neat pictograms, as shown in a fascinating study, *Archaic Bookkeeping* by Hans Nissen, Peter Damerow and Robert K Englund (unmentioned by Bostwick). By the mid-3rd millennium BC, when the Pyramids were being built in Egypt, hieroglyphic records show that labourers were allowed a daily ration of ten pints of beer (*henket*). And when, in the 9th century BC, the Assyrian king Ashurnasirpal II held a ten-day feast to celebrate the move of his capital to Kalhu (Nimrud), cuneiform tablets record that he served 10,000 jugs of beer.

Of course, the beer offered to ancient Egypt's labourers was different from the beer drunk by its pharaohs, which was flavoured with dates, honey, and spices. Nor do today's mass-produced beers much resemble exuberantly flavoured craft beers. As Bostwick zestfully argues, 'Each age has its tastes, each moment its perfect beer. The brewer adapts. His tale is still being told.' ▣

*Andrew Robinson is the author of The Story of Writing and The Story of Measurement, published by Thames & Hudson.*

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by William Bostwick

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