

BOOK REVIEWS

In the Land of Ninkasi: A History of Beer in Ancient Mesopotamia

Paulette, T.

Oxford, Oxford University Press

2024, Pp.360, £21.99

ISBN: 9780197682449

Tate Paulette, archaeologist and associate professor of history at North Carolina State University, has written undoubtedly the most important book published in the field of beer history for some years.

In the *Land of Ninkasi*, subtitled *A History of Beer in Ancient Mesopotamia*, looks at the whole 2,000-year story of brewing in the land between the Euphrates and the Tigris with the sceptical eyes of a scholar who is an expert in Middle East archaeology, knowledgeable enough about the ancient languages spoken in the region to be able to explain them to a lay person, and also knowledgeable enough about brewing to have participated in an attempt with professionals to recreate Sumerian beer (not the well-known effort by Anchor Brewing of San Francisco, but one with Great Lakes Brewing of Cleveland, Ohio).

Most importantly, Paulette completely squashes the claim you will find repeated in dozens – possibly hundreds – of places: that the so-called *Hymn to Ninkasi*, a poem in the Sumerian language to the goddess of beer, at least 3,900 years old, known from three fragmentary clay tablets found in and around the ancient city of Nippur, which stood between the Euphrates and the Tigris, is ‘effectively a Sumerian recipe for brewing beer,’ ‘the oldest beer recipe in history,’ with a description of ‘the detailed brewing process’ that ‘modern researchers have used to recreate Sumerian beer,’ ‘not only a spiritual homage but also detailed brewing instructions for the beverage that came to be known as beer.’

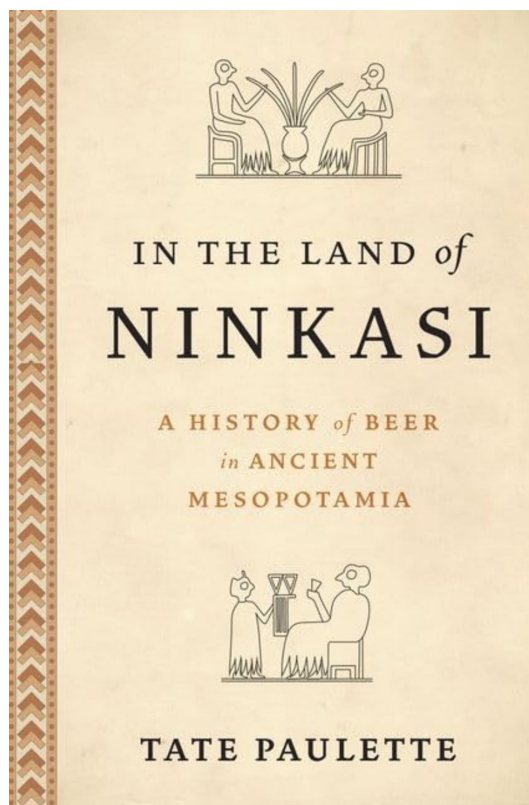
The *Hymn to Ninkasi*, Paulette shows convincingly, is not actually very helpful at all in working out how Sumerians really brewed. The examples he gives of possible equiva-

lents in English are the Robert Burns poem *John Barleycorn*, which talks allegorically about the malting process but is certainly not an accurate guide to 18th century Scottish malting practices; and also the Irish quartet the Clancy Brothers’ great song *Beer, Beer, Beer*, in which the brewing process is described as

A barrel of malt, a bushel of hops, you stir it around with a stick

If, in four thousand years’ time, a future historian only had that song to form theories of how ancient Europeans made beer, she is unlikely to come up with anything very accurate ...

Probably the most important sentence in the whole of Paulette’s book is: ‘The fact is that we do not currently know



exactly how beer was brewed in Mesopotamia.’ So why read *In the Land of Ninkasi* if it cannot answer the big question everyone is interested in? Well, because it’s an excellently written book that pulls together everything we DO currently know about brewing in Mesopotamia – which is quite a lot, actually – in an easy-to-understand fashion, and tells us exactly what we know for sure and what we are only guessing at.

Paulette is also very good on the question of why we can’t use the *Hymn to Ninkasi* to work out exactly how the Sumerians brewed beer, and in particular on the dangers of the unconscious biases we bring to our interpretations of the poem, imposing our modern knowledge of brewing and brewing processes, and brewing terminology, on a description – or an apparent description – of something that was without a doubt very different from the modern Western method of making beer.

In particular he points out that there is considerable doubt over what the *Hymn to Ninkasi* actually says. The translation best known in the English-speaking world – indeed, about the only translation anyone ever references in the English-speaking world – was made by Miguel Civil, professor of Sumerology at the University of Chicago’s Oriental Institute, in 1964. However, there are at least two more translations, and crucially, they differ from Civil at vitally important points. One is by Walther Sallaberger, an Austrian-born Assyriologist, and professor of Assyriology at the University of Munich. His translation was published, in German, in 2012, in a collection of 20 essays in French, German and English in different subjects in the field of Assyrology, put together to honour Pascal Attinger, a Swiss-born professor at the University of Bern, and leading expert in the Sumerian language. Sallaberger called Civil’s 1964 translation of the *Hymn* ‘fundamental for all subsequent work.’ However, he said, ‘the interpretation of the *Ninkasi-Hymne* offered there contradicts in some respects all other, particularly documentary, evidence on beer brewing.’ In other words, Sallaberger reckoned Civil had got his account of Sumerian brewing wrong.

As Paulette shows, there are considerable and important differences between Civil’s translation of technical terms used in the *Hymn* and Sallaberger’s translations. These differences mean we cannot be at all certain from the *Hymn* how Sumerian beer was brewed: was Civil right, was Sallaberger right or are they both wrong? The important word *bappir*, for example, which is clearly a vital ingredient in Sumerian beer, was translated by Civil as ‘beerbread,’ and he described it as a barley loaf which was crumbled with malt and mashed. Sallaberger, however, translated *bappir* as ‘sauerteig,’ ‘sourdough,’ and insisted that it was the yeast in this sourdough that initiated fermentation in Sumerian beer.

Similarly Civil said that the word *titab* in the *Hymn* means ‘cooked mash,’ while Sallaberger says it means ‘spent grain cake,’ (*Treberkuchen* in Sallaberger’s German original), left behind when the wort is run off the mash. A third word, *dida*, Civil said meant ‘sweetwort’ and Sallaberger translated as ‘dry beer.’

There is in fact at least one other modern translation of the *Hymn to Ninkasi*, into Russian, by Veronica Afanasyeva, a Sumerologist and poet born in 1933 who worked for the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg. (A fourth translation, into Italian, also appears to exist.) Paulette does not appear to be aware of the Russian translation, but Afanasyeva, like Civil and Sallaberger someone who had been studying the Sumerian language for decades, came up with yet another translation differing in important places from the others. She seems to agree with Sallaberger that *bappir* means sourdough, but *titab* she translated into Russian as *цисло*, which can mean either ‘wort’ or ‘mash.’ *Dida* Afansieva translates as ‘noble beer,’ very different from both Civil’s ‘sweetwort’ and Sallaberger’s ‘dry beer.’

It is not just individual words but whole sentences that the translators interpret often completely differently. To take one couplet from the fourth stanza, Civil says it means

You are the one who waters the earth-covered malt;
The noble dogs guard [it even] from the potentates,

While Afansieva gives it as

You cover the grain for malt with earth, water it with water,
Trust the watchdogs to guard it.

And Sallaberger comes up with something almost totally different:

Your malt, the semolina was prepared, water was poured into it,
It is vermin of the kind that bends and curls.

In short, there is absolutely no way that anyone can read the *Hymn to Ninkasi* in its differing translations and believe that they now have ‘detailed brewing instructions’ on how to make Sumerian beer.

In the Land of Ninkasi covers much more than the *Hymn to Ninkasi*, however: it starts with a chapter called ‘Beer in world history,’ then takes in the history of Mesopotamia, the ‘land between two rivers’ (which is what Mesopotamia means, of course), looks at what we know from Sumerian and Akkadian records about beers and brewing ingredients between 3,000BC and 1,600BC, and surveys what we know about Sumerian brewing technologies and techniques both

from the surviving literature and the archaeological remains, such as the *Lochbodengefass*, the clay ‘vessel with a hole in the base’ found on sites associated with beer brewing right across Mesopotamia, and which was probably the *gakkul* mentioned at the start of the ‘Drinking beer in a merry mood’ poem found on the same clay tablets as the *Hymn to Ninkasi*. (Astonishingly, nobody is sure exactly how *Lochbodengefässer*, were used in brewing – were they filtering vessels, or fermentation vessels, or something else? This is another good example of how woefully ignorant we actually are about Sumerian brewing, when we know that a particular piece of kit was almost certainly used during the brewing process, but we don’t know *how* it was used, or for what purpose.)

A discussion of brewers and brewing spaces, looking at archaeological sites we know were once breweries, is followed by a fascinating chapter on drinkers and drinking practices, in particular the Sumerian habit of drinking beer (or, to be exact, what was probably beer) communally through long straws or reeds from a clay vase set on a stand, or on the floor. (Disappointingly, for me, Paulette fails to point out that just such communal beer drinking from large pots through straws is still common in East Africa.) And what was it with the surprisingly large number of plaques found by archaeologists – at least 18 are known – showing a naked man having sex with a naked woman from behind, while she sucks up (presumably) beer through a straw from a pot?

The last chapter is titled ‘The beer-drinking experience,’ and it covers the tavern, drinking at work, banquets, ‘drinking with the dead’ – funerary feasts – and how Sumerians saw the effects of beer, from promoting togetherness to provoking fights and arguments. Beer, Paulette says, helped make the Sumerian social world – just as, he points out, it helps make our social worlds today.

The book ends with an epilogue describing three modern attempts to make a Mesopotamian beer, Anchor Brewing of San Francisco’s Ninkasi Sumerian beer from 1989, the experiments in 2005 by Martin Zarnkow of the Technical University of Munich’s Research Centre Weihenstephan for Brewing and Food Quality and a group of colleagues based on findings at Tall Bazi in northern Syria, and the joint venture in 2011-13 between the University of Chicago’s Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures, where Paulette was a grad student, and Great Lakes Brewing of Cleveland, which began in 1988 as the first microbrewery in Ohio and grew to be a top-30 US brewer. Paulette describes how Pat Conway, co-founder of Great Lakes, came to the Institute with the idea of making an ancient beer, and how Paulette and his colleagues put together

a summary of our best understanding of how brewing might have worked in Mesopotamia. This summary was woefully insufficient. The brewers of Great Lakes responded with a list of perhaps thirty questions – questions that were, from their perspective, absolutely essential and, from ours, very difficult (some definitely unanswerable).

That about sums up the difficulty – the impossibility, probably – of brewing an authentic Sumerian beer based on the *Hymn to Ninkasi*. Still, the Institute and Great Lakes had a stab. They malted barley by soaking the grain for a few days, letting it sprout and then air-drying it on the roof of the brewery. Following Sallaberger, they decided *bappir* was sourdough, slow-baked to leave viable yeast in it that would ferment the wort. They brewed in ceramic vessels that were recreations of actual Sumerian pots found on expeditions to Iraq in the 1930s by the Institute’s archaeologists. They made educated guesses about mashing and fermentation, and also tried adding dates to some of the brews.

The resulting beer, over several brewings, Paulette says

ranged from mildly tart to puckeringly sour, from mildly alcoholic (3.5%) to no joke (8%), from milky white to an opaque, yellowish brown, from slightly effervescent to flat as can be.

So even if you try to make authentic Sumerian beer, you don’t know which beer you end up with might be the most authentic: the mildly tart yellowish brown strong one, or the sour white weak one. Or maybe the tart white strong one, or the yellow weak one, or ... Finally, however, Paulette gives a recipe for ‘brew-it-yourself’ Sumerian beer, so that readers can have a go themselves at trying to brew like a Babylonian.

Overall, *In the Land of Ninkasi*, is an excellent study of what Paulette calls ‘the world’s first great beer culture,’ enumerating everything we know and, more importantly, don’t know. It is easily understandable for the non-specialist, and takes time to explain some of the otherwise puzzling aspects of Sumerological literature that articles on the subject, written for experts, assume the reader already knows: why, for example, words in Sumerian are sometimes written in English with subscript number, such as *munu₂* (it means the original cuneiform was the second symbol discovered by Assyriologists to have the meaning ‘*munu*’), or sometimes written in CAPITALS: this means the sign is a Sumerian word, eg KAS₃, pronounced to rhyme with cosh rather than cash, which normally should be read as the Sumerian for ‘beer’ but is written in caps when it should be read as an ideogram for the Akkadian word for beer, *šikaru*, or as a syllable in a longer word.

This is, I think, a book anybody with a serious interest in beer can read with pleasure, and it is essential reading if you

wish to talk about beer in the ancient past. Paulette must be congratulated for writing an instant entrant to any 'Ten Books About Beer History You Must Read' list. However, will it stop people claiming the *Hymn to Ninkasi* is a Sumerian beer recipe? Alas, I fear not ...

MARTYN CORNELL

Around the World in 80 Beers - a Global History of Brewing

Cornell, M.

Barnsley: Pen & Sword History

2024, Pp.256, £25.00

ISBN: 9781526791474

There are 1,001 beers to try before you die with Adrian Tierney Jones (1,000 if you don't count Budweiser ... he jokes), Jeff Evans has 366, one for every day of the year, then Roger Protz has 300. These are profusely illustrated in colour. Do you feel short changed when Martyn Cornell's latest offering goes around the world in just 80 beers? Perhaps slightly disappointing is that all his illustrations are in black and white when some of the vintage advertising materials would benefit from a bit of technicolour.

Apart from the publisher Pen & Sword stinting on production costs, we can look forward to Martyn's thorough approach to writing; well researched, accurate, extensive and hopefully with a bit of myth busting on the way. Such comments range from 'there appears to be no record of' all the way to 'nonsense on stilts' so look forward to having a lot of received wisdom thoroughly destroyed.

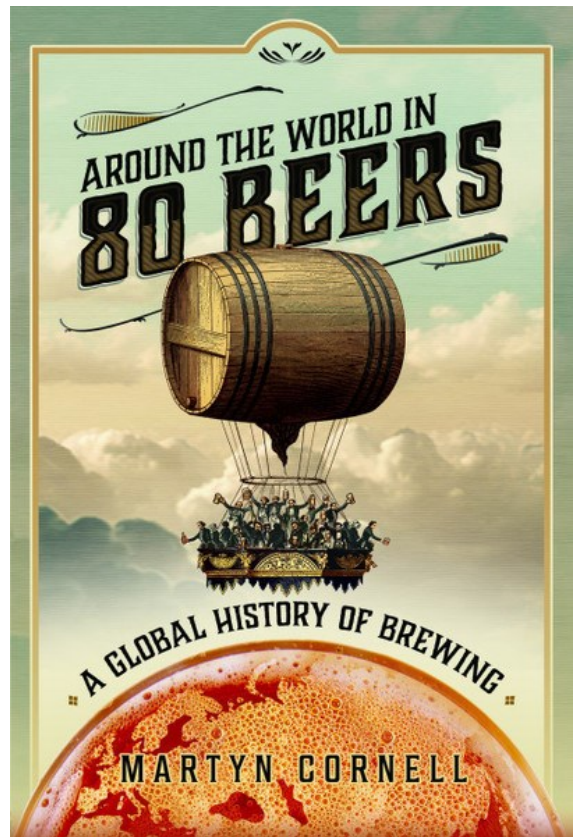
This is a history book, the beers are a mere excuse and are not analysed in any detail. The entire story of beer and the various styles from around the globe are deftly divided into 80 sections and given a geographical handle and linked to one of that nation's beers. He visits over 40 countries. Cornell must be very pleased that Palestine's Taybeh Brewery is operating giving the hook to cover the earliest evidence of beer making by the Natufians in northern Israel some thirteen thousand years ago.

Cornell starts with Porter and finishes in New Zealand with cans of oyster extract for making the famous Castletown Oyster Stout, once, but only briefly, the Isle of Man's biggest export. No2 is Burton Pale Ale even including the name of the boat which went down in January 1829 with a consignment for export. I mention this because Bass debunked this story themselves saying there was no record of the sub-

sequent auction of the casks in Liverpool. Clearly Martyn is a better researcher than Mr Bass! It was in that year the term IPA appeared in a Calcutta newspaper but was never used by Bass themselves – always simple Pale Ale. We learn that Gabriel Sedlmayr sent some bottom fermenting yeast to Edinburgh in 1835 in thanks to brewer John Muir who was willing to share his ledgers when all the others on his grand tour with Dreher were secretive. Apparently the lager yeast did not settle well in Edinburgh or else Muir failed to look after it, but wouldn't history be different if he had?

We are also told that the only thing original about Pilsener Urquell was the 1842 maltings which employed the English kilning method with indirect firing. Then I did not know that Queen Victoria was not allowed to become Elector of Hanover on the death of William IV as she was a woman so the title passed to a male cousin. These are typical snippets so be prepared for interesting trivia as well as the survey of the world's beer styles, including of course a number you will never have heard of.

Beer 41 reaches the Mediterranean, Ninkasi is firmly debunked in Iraq and the spread of lagers following colonialisation makes for some fascinating stories along with a number of native beers unknown to most of us. I have at last



found out what Catharina Sour is. This beer appears in the World Beer Cup schedule and comes from southern Brazil where émigré Germans set up home at a place they called Blumenau in the state of Santa Catarina back in 1850. An early brewer lost his finger in a tobacco chopper but dried it out to use as a pipe compactor! Today the city has the largest Oktoberfest outside Munich and its now famous sour is a take on Berlinerweisse with less haphazard lactic souring using the wort kettle – a process first reported in 1906.

Each beer is covered in two or three pages only so it is eminently ‘dippable into’ and I enjoyed the dipping. Some of the company histories in foreign lands can get a bit tedious as can who begat whom far, far away and a long, long time ago but overall if you want an easily digested potted story of the beverage we all love you could do a lot worse.

ROGER PUTMAN

Drink Maps in Victorian Britain

Butler, K.

Oxford: Bodleian Library

2024, Pp.208, £25.00

ISBN: 9781851245789

Over the years I’ve created a number of what you could call ‘drink maps’ and they have provided me with the basis for some great pub crawls. But the history of the original drink maps shows that they were designed to reduce rather than promote the consumption of alcohol.

In the newly-published book *Drink Maps in Victorian Britain* author Kris Butler seeks to tell the story of these unusual Victorian documents and come to some sort of conclusion about whether they ultimately proved to be thought-provoking or thirst-provoking.

It’s a well-designed publication on high quality paper that does full justice to the many maps and diagrams displayed across its 192 pages that help to tell the tale that begins with Temperance Movement seeking to use visual documents in the form of maps to highlight the high density of places selling alcohol in UK cities and towns.

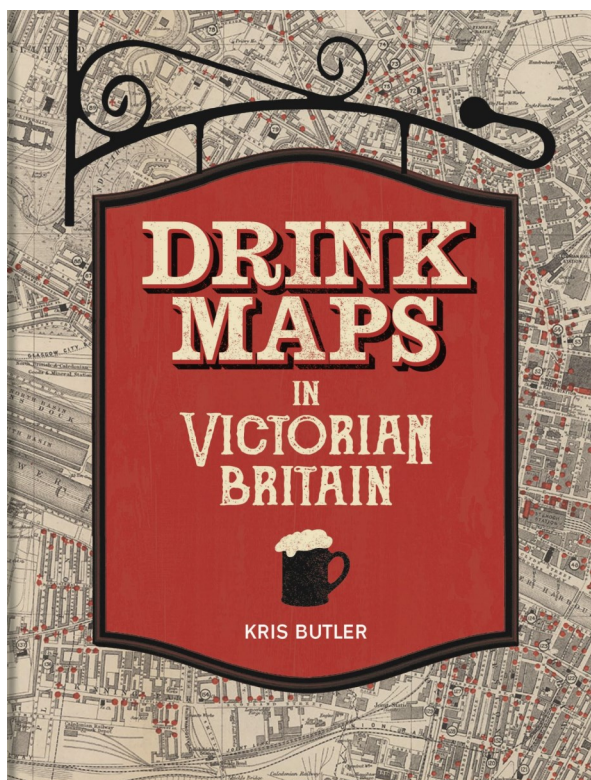
They argued that the evil drink was affecting work productivity, family life and society in general and that the easy accessibility of alcohol did not help. Certainly the fact that a mere half square mile of London in 1877 had as many as 276 places to purchase alcohol fuelled their cause. The book details the period of the Beerhouse Act of 1830 that prompt-

ed more outlets to open selling beer to counter the consumption of gin and other spirits that had a shocking impact. The famous Hogarth engravings Beer Street and Gin Lane are represented in the book.

During this period it highlights the unusual ruling that allowed bona fide travellers to effectively order alcohol outside of the regular trading hours if they could prove they had travelled more than three miles. Needless to say this was incredibly tough to police.

A major chapter in the book covers the legal victory in a Blackburn town formerly called Over Darwen when a request for the renewal of an alcohol licence was turned down and involved in the ruling was its proximity to other licensed premises. The case involved a drink map of the area and this led to the Temperance Movement to seek to leverage value from the ruling by presenting drink maps to magistrates in many other areas as evidence towards potentially rejecting licence applications and renewals.

This led to many maps being produced around the UK. But did drink maps actually work? Butler does not deliver a conclusive verdict but does highlight that in 1886 a map of Leicester includes 748 drink locations and in 1904 there were 844 locations so the Temperance Movement lacked effect in some areas for sure.



The book encompasses lots of detail on notable licences and applications along with a look at Charles Booth and his well-known poverty maps that later included public houses. Quotes from Booth highlight rather sensibly how he regarded male drunkenness as having reduced as a result of public houses proving increasingly acceptable venues for female drinkers, which changed social behaviour. However, he rather tarnishes his reputation by adding that drunkenness in women was more common after marriage and that 'it is not until they get older that women become regular soakers.'

The potential dryness of the topic of *Drink Maps* is overcome by the accessibility of Butler's writing style and anybody interested in beer and its social impact will find plenty of interest in this publication.

GLYNN DAVIS