

The Archaeology of Beer – Rob Symmons, Curator of the Palace.

Summarised by Anne de Potier



The beard, the beer, the beaker. “Beer is said to make you brave, funny, and attractive to the opposite sex.”

Archaeology and beer go together. Rob started young – his interest in archaeology began aged 6; we won't say when he started on the beer. His expertise in both was clear throughout his thoroughly entertaining talk. Beer is made from water, grain and yeast, plus flavouring which is often hops but does not have to be. Archaeologically this makes finding evidence difficult: not only are the main ingredients not easily preserved, but they are the same as in bread. However, associated pottery is more helpful: you don't take bread from a tankard.

There is considerable cultural evidence for beer, but probably not from as long ago as it was first made. For the Sumerians in Bronze Age Mesopotamia beer drinking was a social activity, and beer making an organised industry. They had their own goddess of beer, Ninkasi. Rob believes the depiction below, from around 3000BC, shows citizens sharing a brew. There is unfortunately no indication of which sex each

of these people is. In the third century BC rich Egyptians had their own brewhouses. Others went to pubs. Images show that both peoples drank their beer through a straw.

In Britain, beer making came about once people became settled during the Neolithic, when crops could be grown and products could be preserved. According to our speaker “the Neolithic revolution was about getting drunk”. Storage pits for grain have been found, and Rob suggested that the moist grain that sprouted round the edges of these, once discarded, wetted and left for yeast in the air to transform, could have been the basis for discovering the magical process of beer making. There is evidence of a brewed drink from Bronze Age pottery, and maybe the Beaker people were the ultimate experts?



Rob played a video (made in Ireland! <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dZ6K03ovxCM>) showing how beer could have been made in the Bronze Age, and then gave us some he'd made to try, shared in a suitably prehistoric-looking beaker which he had also made. Even non-beer drinkers admitted it was surprisingly good.

Rob concentrated on the cultural aspects of beer, and highlighted the continuing themes through time: tradition, community (beer apparently makes one “brave, funny, and attractive to the opposite sex”), the drinking vessel (aurochs horns evolved into the yard of ale), and the concept of ‘rounds’, which perpetuates the obligation to repay debts. Cheers, Rob!

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