



Bulletin du Musée Hongrois des Beaux-Arts
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Mélanges offerts à Edith Varga

édités par Hedvig Győry

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BUDAPEST

The Divine Power of Wine

Although widely consumed in today's society, wine is traditionally a beverage for special occasions. Even in Ancient Egypt, wine was not merely used to quench thirst. The ancient Egyptians used elegant goblets, beakers and small bowls, and they bestowed upon wine attributes exceeding those of a simple drink. A set of formalities evolved in the consumption of wine, and these formalities, while originally a means to an end, eventually became an end unto themselves.¹

It is necessary to consider the important role of the gods in the Egyptian society, their belief in the power of the gods to maintain their existence in this world and in the afterlife. Wine was associated with three of their divinities: Osiris, Shezmu and Hathor.

Osiris, the principal god in the Myth of Creation from Heliopolis, Lord of the Dead, was also a central figure in the commemorative festival for the resurrection and for the flood of the Nile that brought abundant crops. The vines represented the symbolic resurrection of Osiris, as well as the beginning of a new life cycle.² Osiris was the god that regulated life in Egypt.

The association of wine with Maat appears clearly in the "Book of the Dreams", from Chester Beatty III Papyrus: "... If one sees himself in a dream while drinking wine: good, it means he would live in *justice*."³

Wine was largely consumed in the various festivities in Ancient Egypt. During the crowning ceremony of each Pharaoh, it was customary for the new king to offer wine to the god Amun. On the occasion of the Heb-Sed Festival, the king would also offer wine to celebrate the gods.

¹ M. Bakos, The significance of wine drinking in love and in the daily life in Ancient Egypt. *In: Atti Sesto Congresso Internazionale di Egittologia VII*, Torino 1991, p. 319.

² Mu-Chou Poo, *The offering of wine in ancient Egypt*. Thesis, Baltimore 1984, p. 206.

³ E. Bresciani, *Letteratura e poesia dell'Antico Egitto*, Torino 1990, p. 486.

The Egyptians regarded death as the end of a cycle of existence: the return to the origins, the rebirth into eternity. For the dead to follow the passage to the afterlife, it was necessary for the living to execute all the details of the funeral ceremony. In these ceremonies, wine was essential not only for its theological and mythological significance, but also because the Egyptians sought to offer their best for their Gods and their dead. As a result, wine has been a fundamental component of their offering lists since ancient times.

In ancient times, as today, there was the practice of putting detailed labeling on the wine jars. Analysis of the amphora found in many tombs, especially from Thebes, has enabled researchers to identify the wine's origin, in spite of the fact that the wine itself had dried up centuries before. The determinative hieroglyph for words such as "vine", "garden" and "wine" is a bunch of grapes supported by forked props. Most jars were labeled simply *irp* = "wine", but sometimes they could show the designation *irp nfr* - "good wine"⁴.

It is well documented that wine consumption in Ancient Egypt was restricted to the highest levels of society (aside from medicinal purposes), primarily because the price of wine was five to ten times higher than beer. In addition, because of their great demand for watering and need for specialist care, the grapes for wine could only be planted by rich land owners. Nubians, Asiatics and Palestinians were utilized in the harvesting and making of wine. Ramesses II refers to this when dedicated more than five hundred vineyards as temples for the god Amun with the words: "... *I made vineyards for you in the Southern Oasis [Kharga and Daklah] and again in the Northern Oasis [Bahriyah] without number and in Upper Egypt countless others. I multiplied them in Lower Egypt into hundreds of thousands. I furnished them with gardeners from the foreign prisoners.*"⁵

Mu-Chou Poo points out that wine was a way of breaking the barrier between the living and the dead, the secular and the divine. Therefore, the offering of wine to the deities would have been much more than simple pleasure to the tongue.⁶

Shezmu, the bloodthirsty god of wine pressing, played two distinct roles. One role, representing his good side, was symbolized by bringing wine to

⁴ W. C. Hayes, *Inscriptions from the palace of Amenthotep III*, *JNES* 10 (1951), fig. 23.

⁵ H. Kees, *Ancient Egypt. A Cultural Topography*, London 1977, p. 82.

⁶ Poo, *op. cit.* (note 1) p. 44.

Osiris. His other role, the pressing of the grapes to extract their juice, represented his destructive power.⁷ Originally, Shezmu was simply a benevolent god. However, after the New Kingdom, he assumed the new role of ointment-maker.⁸ In ancient times, perfumes were extracted from fragrant substances by first soaking the substances in oil and then squeezing them into a sack, just as the juice for wine was extracted from grapes. The grapes corresponded to human heads, and the juice to blood. The fact that Shezmu, god of wine, is represented by two personalities (one good and the other cruel) is significant because it acknowledges that when consumed in excess, even wine can become harmful. In his "*Instructions*", Any states that if one drinks too much, falls and injures himself, no one will hold out a hand to him. On the contrary, they will say: " ... *Out with the drunk!*"⁹

Love for the land (and for the Nile with its floods) was a dominant characteristic of the ancient Egyptians. However, Sinuhe in his voluntary exile to Asia, describes his state of happiness and prosperity in his new land with these words: "... *It was a good land, named Yaa. Figs were in it, and grapes. It had more wine than water...*"¹⁰ For an Egyptian, it sounds unusually important for wine to be compared to water, as the Egyptians gave great value to water. Aristides of Smyrne, in II. c. B. C., reported that the Egyptians were the only people, as far as he knew, that kept water as others kept wine: water was saved for three to four years and given the same value as wine.¹¹

Moreover, another example that shows wine as a rare and precious liquid for the Egyptians is Wenamon, in his journey to Fenicia, when he said: "*I reached Dor, a town of the Tjeker, and Beder its Prince, gave me 50 loaves of bread, one jug of wine and one leg of beef*".¹² Only after that description of his goods did he report on the jars of silver and debens of gold that had been stolen from him in that town.

Although soldiers could at times receive wine as payment for their deeds, civilians such as farmers, shepherds, craftsmen or house servants would seldom have the opportunity to relish the drink. In certain situations, however,

⁷ Poo, *op. cit.* (note 1) p. 239.

⁸ M. Ciccarello, Shesmu the Letopolite, *SAOC* 39, Chicago 1977, p. 46.

⁹ M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*. Vol. I, Berkeley 1985, p. 137.

¹⁰ E. Bresciani. *op.cit* (note 3) p. 167.

¹¹ J. Leclant, L'eau, la santé et la maladie dans le monde grec, *BCH Supplément* 28, Paris 1994, p. 11.

¹² E. Bresciani. *op.cit* (note 3) p. 598.

wine was indispensable and would be bought at any value. In pharaonic medicine, wine was consumed as an aid for the ingestion of other substances: with frankincense and honey it had anti-verminous properties; with dill it soothed pain; with salt it cured coughs. Other properties were also attributed to wine: appetite stimulant, asthma medication, diuretic, fever reducer, and nose antiseptic.

The Egyptians also used wine in magical ceremonies. For example, in a spell against the bite of a scorpion: over the images of Atum, Horus and Isis, those who had been stung should drink beer or wine.

A very good wine, as pointed out by Finet, was produced during the Reign of Mari and was traded everywhere in the East mainly through its rivers.¹³ All the societies in this period needed wine because, like the Egyptians, they attributed a special healing power to wine. The Hittites, for instance, used wine in ritual ceremonies against impotence. In the words of Pissuwattis of Arzawa, a woman who lived in Parassa: "... if a man possesses no reproductive power or has no desire for women, he needs a libation..." where, among other common ingredients, "... the fleece of an unblemished sheep and a pitcher of wine..."¹⁴ were added.

Hathor is perhaps one of the most ancient goddesses in the Egyptian pantheon, the supreme goddess of sexual love in Ancient Egypt. She was identified by the Greeks as their goddess Aphrodite. This indicates one of the most important aspects of Hathor's personality: she is the deity of love in all of its features. At this goddess' Temple at Dendera, an "amphora" of wine was among the ten more significant objects related to her. However, Hathor also has a destructive aspect. In the myth of the Destruction of Mankind, she is the violent goddess sent by the sun-god to combat humanity's insubordination. But, she is mollified by an intoxicating drink which calms her ire and turns her from a raging lioness into a friendly cat. The Egyptians believed that the ritual to worship Hathor increased the god's presence, and they used wine in the ceremony to prevent her negative attack.¹⁵

Through literature, it is also possible to ascertain the relationship between wine and moments of passion, as in the words of Nekhet-Sobek:

¹³ A. Finet, *Le vin à Mari*, *Archiv für Orientforschung*, XXV (1974), pp. 122-131.

¹⁴ J. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to Old Testament*, Princeton 1969, p. 349.

¹⁵ E. Hornung, *Conceptions of god in ancient Egypt. The one and the many*, New York 1990, p. 205.

*"When you go to the house of the sister
and charge towards her grotto,
the gate is made high.
Its mistress cleans it
and furnishes it with the palate's delight,
exquisite wines, specially reserved.
You confound her senses
but stops at night when she says to you,
'Hold me tight that we may lie like this
when dawn comes'"¹⁶*

The expression 'go to somebody's house' likely had erotic appeal for the ancient Egyptians. This is confirmed by the following text, for the relationship established between wine and sex. The Egyptians were masters in the use of metaphores to express feelings of daily life:

*"Distracting is the 'foliage' of my 'pasture'
[the mouth] of my girl is a lotus bud,
her breasts are mandrake apples,
her arms are [vines],
[her eyes] are fixed like berries,
her brow a snare of willow,
and I the wild goose!
My [beak] snips [her hair] for bait,
as worms for bait in the trop".¹⁷*

This beautiful association between vines and the body of the beloved sounds very romantic, and clearly shows the complicity among humans, love and nature.

*"How sweet is the brewed beer
when I am at his side
and my hands are touching him!
the breezes blow as I say
in my heart, 'Let's get drunk
on this sweet wine, for I
am consecrated to you through the powers."¹⁸*

¹⁶ L. Manniche, *Sexual Life in Ancient Egypt*, London-New York 1987, p. 80.

¹⁷ W. K. Simpson, *The literature of ancient Egypt*, New York 1972, p. 299.

¹⁸ B. Fowler, *Love lyrics of ancient Egypt*. London 1994, p. 84.

This verse sounds somewhat Freudian. Although the association between libido and censorship is quite clear to us, this association may not have been made by the Ancient Egyptians, either in words or images. The scribe subtly indicates that the drinking of wine could set free emotions and desires they would not openly express.

As evident through a variety of sources, wine was a very special drink in Ancient Egypt. It was related to three important gods, and it was used as an offering for the Gods and for the ka of the dead. It was rare and expensive, a symbol of power and richness. The Egyptians also acknowledged that wine could set free controlled emotions, so it was used to describe love, either in a direct or in a metaphoric manner. When used in excess, wine could lead a person to inappropriate behaviour.

In Ancient Egypt, as in several contemporary societies, wine was considered a beverage for special occasions. As the Egyptians became acquainted with wine's various properties, they respected its power for changing feelings and even behaviour. They realized the ability of wine to allow humans to feel their vulnerability and to feel the illusion of their certainties.

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