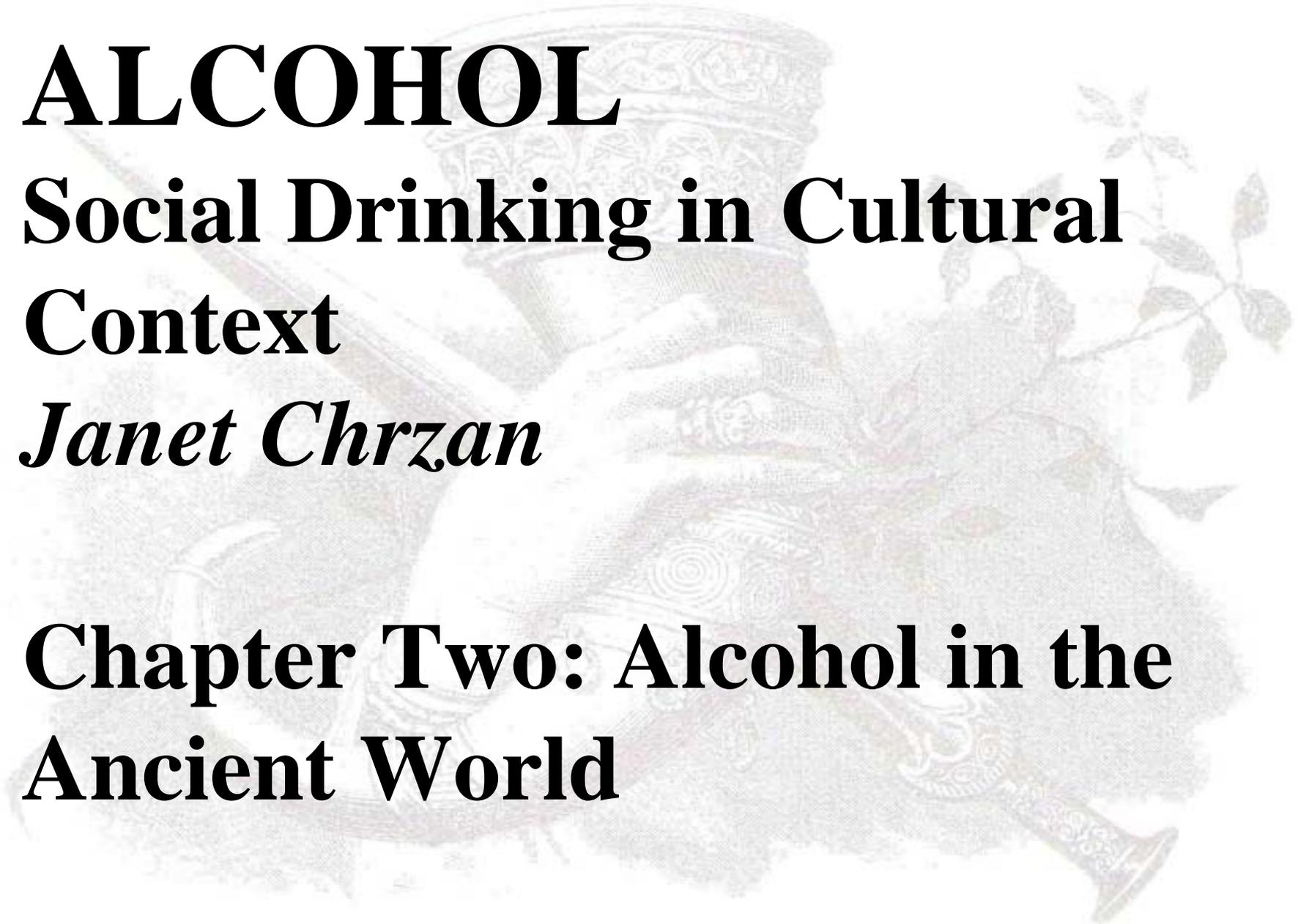


ALCOHOL

Social Drinking in Cultural Context

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Chapter Two: Alcohol in the Ancient World



“No children without sex - no drunkenness without beer”
Ancient Sumerian Proverb

“The mouth of a perfectly contented man is filled with beer”
Egyptian inscription from 2200 BC

“The peoples of the Mediterranean began to emerge from barbarism when they learnt to cultivate the olive and the vine”
Thucydides , 5th century BC

“I like wine best drunk at the cost of others”
Diogenes the Cynic, 412-323 BC

Biological/ecological history of early intoxicant use among *Homo sapiens*:

Milton: argues there is little evidence of primate use but that humans might wish to use in order to alter subjectivity

McGovern: intoxicants may have contributed to the development of human culture, especially the arts

Sherratt: early intoxicant use probably transcended our current categories of food and drug and also may have fulfilled spiritual, medical and secular roles

Katz and Voigt: use of alcohol conferred Darwinian advantages upon people and communities

Sherratt (1995): “Alcohol and Its Alternatives” In Jordan Goodman , Paul E. Lovejoy and Andrew Sherratt (Eds.). *Consuming Habits: Global and Historical Perspectives on How Cultures Define Drugs*. London and New York : Routledge : 11 – 45 .

“The history of psychoactive substances is a continuing process of transformation, involving complex patterns of incorporation, interaction and opposition”

“the use of psychoactive substances covers a spectrum of practices which from a modern, Western point of view might be described as religious, medical and secular. And where only one such substance is available to a society, it may indeed combine all three aspects – although ‘secular’ uses are likely to be subject to contextually appropriate use and prescription.”

Sherratt analyzes intoxicant use in the ancient world and argues that adoption is determined by ecological conditions, technological advances, proximity to other cultures, issues of identity (the role and power of dominant and sub-dominant cultures), access to substances and beliefs about use

Sherratt (1995): “Alcohol and Its Alternatives” In Jordan Goodman , Paul E. Lovejoy and Andrew Sherratt (Eds.). *Consuming Habits: Global and Historical Perspectives on How Cultures Define Drugs*. London and New York : Routledge : 11 – 45 .

Thought exercise: provide examples of how alcohol functions or how use is supported and encouraged in each of these categories among the Greeks and Romans, as well as among our own 21st-century North American culture:

Ecological conditions

Is it possible to grow wine grapes? Grains for beer? Can they be stored safely?

Technology

Do production and storage processes allow for the making of wine or beer, and are there means to distribute to the population?

Proximity to other cultures

Is it possible to learn about cultivation, production and use from nearby cultures that make wine or beer? Can cultural beliefs and use be influenced by other cultures?

Identity (how does alcohol contribute to a sense of self?)

Do social practices encourage the use of the intoxicant, and if so, does that contribute to how individuals think about themselves and others as social beings?

Access to substances and beliefs about use

Is it legal to obtain the intoxicant, and acceptable to use? Are there restrictions on who can use, and how? If restrictions occur, is use tied to moral categories?

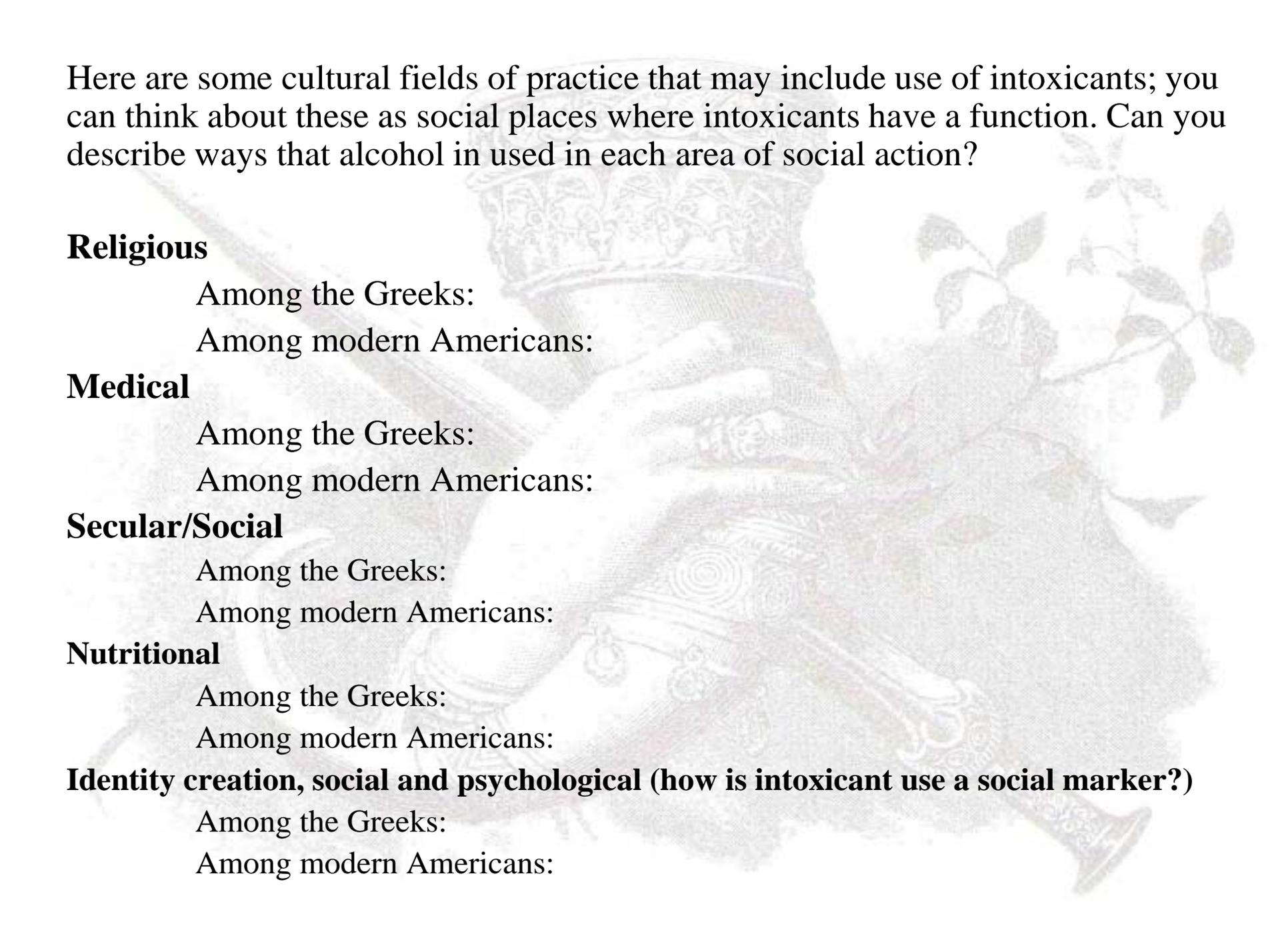
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The use of a drug is constructed on three levels, and users must learn to use appropriately or face censure. This censure could be tied to morality (knowing when, where, how and why to use appropriately can cause the user to be labeled a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ person) or social competence (knowing when, where, how and why to use appropriately can cause the user to be labeled a competent social actor – or a loser) . Three practices the user must master are:

Practical choice of substance: The user must learn how to choose the right form of the intoxicant (wine, whiskey, beer, etc.), how to prepare it for intake and how to drink. For instance, drinking directly from a wine or liquor bottle would be improper in most circumstances, while doing so from a beer bottle would be acceptable. For the Greeks, drinking unwatered wine was anathema, to modern Americans, adding water to wine would be equally questionable...

Level of experience: The user has to learn how to ingest the substance to produce an appropriate response, socially and pharmacologically. The proper amount and the response are culturally negotiated and may differ from one social group to another.

Social assignment of contextual meaning to the act of consumption: The user must demonstrate that s(h)e understands and values the beliefs and systems of morality, values and power connected to use and will uphold the rules of the culture.



Here are some cultural fields of practice that may include use of intoxicants; you can think about these as social places where intoxicants have a function. Can you describe ways that alcohol is used in each area of social action?

Religious

Among the Greeks:

Among modern Americans:

Medical

Among the Greeks:

Among modern Americans:

Secular/Social

Among the Greeks:

Among modern Americans:

Nutritional

Among the Greeks:

Among modern Americans:

Identity creation, social and psychological (how is intoxicant use a social marker?)

Among the Greeks:

Among modern Americans:

To better understand how alcohol ‘works’ in a culture, it’s a good idea to think about how alcohol use is perceived by the social categories of gender, access to power (political and financial) and status (socio-economic as well as cultural and social capital)

How do each of these affect how you see a person who is drinking an alcoholic beverage?

How would that perception then determine how appropriateness and deviance are determined?

How would that perception affect medical categorization of a drinking person?

How does use of intoxicants represent power variables?

How are different types of use by different categories of people regarded by our society? By the Greeks?

Why are age, gender, status, membership in particular groups and notions of exclusiveness or hospitality such significant classifications used by cultures to distinguish which practices with regard to the serving of alcohol are "appropriate" ?

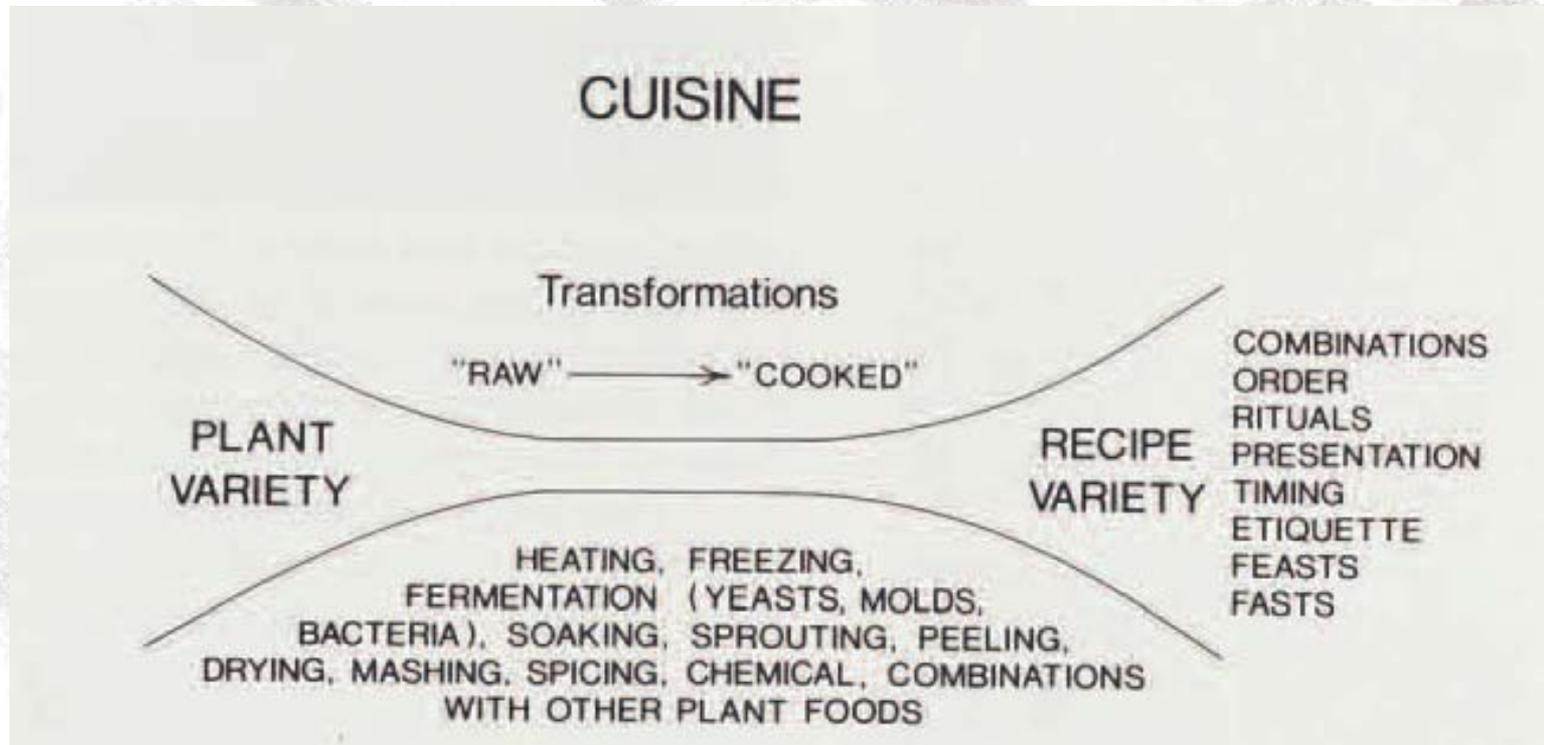
Katz , Solomon , and Mary Voight (1986). “Bread and Beer.”
Expedition 28 (2): 23 – 34

Biocultural Adaptation:

- **What is it?**
- **How is beer an example of biocultural adaptation?**
- **What are Katz and Voight’s analysis about WHY beer was readily adopted by ancient populations?**
- **How does this use of beer promote population fitness?**

Katz , Solomon , and Mary Voight (1986). “Bread and Beer.”
Expedition 28 (2): 23 – 34

How does this diagram explain the development of beer technology in the ancient world?



Attributes of Dionysius

- Son of supreme God (Zeus) and a mortal woman
- Alternately and simultaneously, he is the son of the Mother Goddess
- Dies and is reborn, thus proving divinity
- Ability to turn grape juice into intoxicant also proves Godhood
- Mediates between men and gods due to dual origin
- Ambiguous god because capable of good and evil, just like wine
- Spring festival of rebirth is his primary ritual
- Symbols are an egg, a chicken, and a wreath of leaves around the head; often shown with a shepherd's crook as well
- Becomes Bacchus to the Romans; the Bacchus cult becomes ascendant during the first centuries AD
- Often portrayed with a side-kick, Silenus, who is sometimes a dwarf, sometimes a satyr
- Wild excesses of Bacchic rituals condemned by Christian Rome (5th century); there are attempts within Rome to tame Bacchus and re-imagine him as less abandoned
- The idea of Dionysius was probably blended into the Green Man mythology of the Celts as the church expanded through Europe; the 'wild man of the woods' provides much of the regenerative and unpredictable natural power earlier attributed to Dionysius and Bacchus

The ambiguous qualities of Dionysus can be understood in this quote from a play by Eubulus: “first cup for health, the second for love and pleasure, the third for sleep. If men continue drinking, the fourth belongs no longer to Dionysus, but to hubris, the fifth to shouting, the sixth to revel, the seventh to black eyes, the eighth to summonses, the ninth to bile, and the tenth to madness and to tossing the furniture about.”



Attic black figure amphora
of Dionysus, bacchante and
satyr (525–500 BC)
(Courtesy of the University
of Pennsylvania Museum of
Archaeology and
Anthropology)

The Symposium



Youth playing kottobos , a Greek drinking game. Courtesy of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology)

- Why did Symposia occur?
- Who attended Symposia? Who were the hosts of Symposia? Who were the guests?
- Where were Symposia held?
- What were the activities that occurred during a Symposia?
- What were the cultural meanings of a Symposium?
- What is the symposium's legacy in our current world?

Symbolic meanings and relationships of the Symposium include:

- 1. There is a dichotomy between civilized behavior and alcoholic excess, and between peace and discord demonstrated by the mediation of relationships between god and men, and men in general through shared alcohol use; this is shown in the tension surrounding how many cups to drink.**

The symposium stands as a means to test in-group belonging in elite Greek aristocratic society:

- 2. Knowing how to behave (how to perform the embodied identity of a symposium) defined fellowship, in-group construction and maintenance (insiders and outsiders) of class relationships.**
- 3. Drinking in and out of the symposium defined power in ancient Greece:**
 - The manner of drinking – the cups of the taverns and the deep cups of the aristocratic symposium - serve to reify this power differential**
 - The place of drinking – and its capacity for privacy – defined power within society**
 - The gender of the drinkers and their roles served to support male power**
 - The discourses of ethnicity, gender and race serve to guarantee elite male power**



Given that the use of other psychoactive substances (cannabis, poppy/opium, etc) predate alcohol production and use, how would you explain alcohol's status as the primary intoxicant of Western civilization?

Image: Johannes Vermeer [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons