

Did Beer Give Birth to Civilization?

About 10,000 years ago, humans in the Fertile Crescent began tilling soil and cultivating crops. Why they began doing this we'll likely never know for certain. But compelling evidence suggests it was related to the discovery of the process of fermentation and, more specifically, beer.

Nearly 30 years ago, Solomon Katz, a University of Pennsylvania anthropologist, and archeologist [Mary M. Voigt](#) published a study: "[Bread and Beer](#)." In the paper, Katz and Voigt suggests that ancient Sumerians in Mesopotamia made a startling discovery that changed history: if one soaked wheat or barley in water to make gruel it did not rot but transformed into a frothy liquid.

This liquid, it turned out, tasted good and made one feel even better. But more importantly, it offered great sustenance (in the ancient world, beer was second in protein only to animal meat).

"The initial discovery of a stable way to make alcohol provided enormous motivation for continuing to collect these seeds," [the authors wrote](#), adding that "beer drinkers would have had a 'selective advantage' in the form of improved health for themselves and...their offspring."

It is undisputable that beer was a big deal in ancient Mesopotamia. The world's oldest known recipe for beer comes [from Sumeria](#); it appears on stone tablets that date around the 3rd millennium B.C. (Editor's note: It appears [an older recipe](#) was recently discovered in China.)

It should be noted that Katz and Voigt were neither the first nor last scholars to posit the theory that brewing begat farming. It was first put forth by botanist Jonathan D. Sauer

in the 1950s. As recently as 2013 research was published showing that farming in the ancient world—in places ranging from [the Mediterranean](#) to [Mexico](#)—was taking place largely to provide crops for brewing.

If civilization does indeed owe its existence to the frothy drink derided by sophisticants and spurned by teetotalers, it would give a whole new meaning to the quote often attributed (incorrectly, probably) to Ben Franklin: “Beer is proof that God loves us and wants us to be happy.”

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