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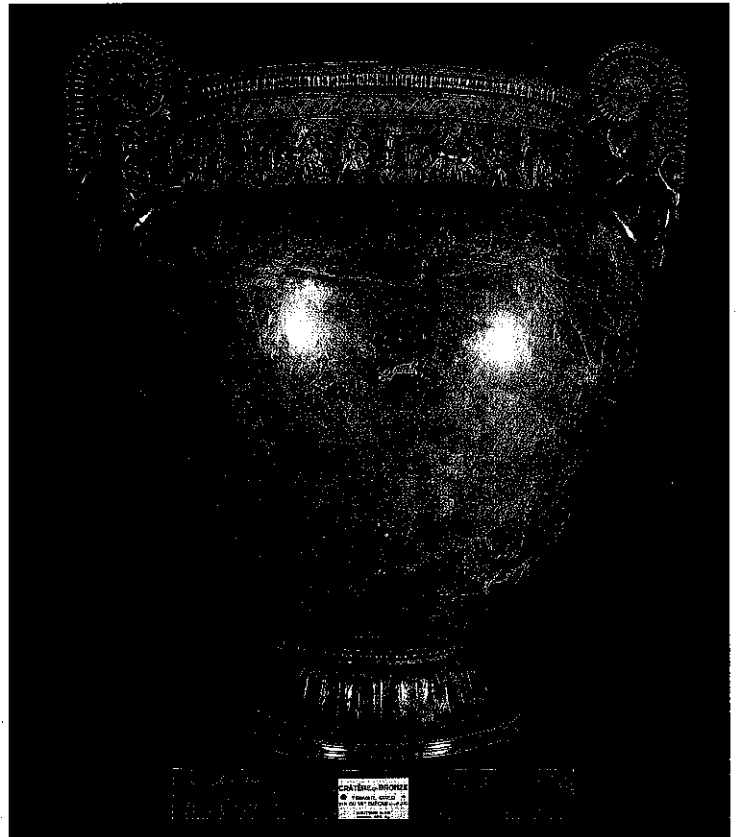
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QUENCHING CELTIC THIRST

By MICHAEL DIETLER

The Celts of Western Europe were prodigious drinkers. During the Iron Age—from the seventh century B.C. until the time of Caesar's conquest of Gaul in the mid-first century B.C.—they imported impressive quantities of wines from Etruria (modern Tuscany), Massalia (modern Marseille), and Rome. In the process they gained an international reputation as reckless inebriates whose thirst cost them military victories and turned them, during feasts, into maniacal people willing to fight to the death over the best cut of meat.

Although undoubtedly fond of their drink, this colorful reputation is to a large extent due to a misunderstanding of the nature of Celtic

drinking and feasting customs by censorious Greek and Roman authors. Drinking was extremely important to Greeks and Romans as well; they just did it differently and were appalled by practices that did not conform to their own. Consequently, Plato included the Celts among six barbarian peoples noted for drunkenness; and other ancient writers offered vivid testimony concerning their prowess as imbibers. Diodorus Siculus, for example, noted that they would voraciously quaff the wine they imported, and then "fall into a stupor or into a maniacal disposition." From Polybius and Plutarch we learn that the Celts brought disaster upon themselves by drinking too much after

battles. Having successfully sacked Rome in the early fourth century B.C., they left themselves open to slaughter while sleeping off the effects of their celebration. Pausanias tells us that the oracle at Delphi mysteriously forbade the local Greeks to take their wine along while retreating from a Celtic onslaught in 278 B.C.; all became clear when, on the heels of victory, the inebriated Celts again became easy prey to their adversaries. Notoriously given to drinking their wine undiluted (anathema to a good Greek), the Celts are reported to have been willing to trade a slave for a single amphora of it. But their thirst was by no means limited to imports; they also consumed various home brews. The predominant native drink was beer made from grain—what Dionysos of Halicarnassus disparagingly called “a foul smelling liquor made from barley rotted in water.”

Questions of ethnocentric bias aside, one of the problems with this literary lore about the Celts and their “furious passion for drinking,” as Diodorus Siculus described it, is that most of it dates to the last two centuries B.C. during the time when Celtic imports of wine from Rome had swelled to massive proportions. More than 50 shipwrecks laden with Roman wine have been found off the coast of southern France; and André Tchernia, a French archaeologist who is an expert on the Roman wine trade, offers a conservative estimate that as many as 40 million amphoras may have been imported into Celtic territory over a period of about a century at the end of the Iron Age. That represents the consumption of about 2.65 million gallons of wine per year! Hundreds of thousands of sherds of these amphoras have been dredged from the bed of the Saône River in Burgundy; and around Toulouse, in southwestern France, the fragments of this pottery are still so abundant in the fields that they dull the blades of farmers’ plows in spite of centuries of clearing.

But the Celts actually began to

TOUCH THE PAST



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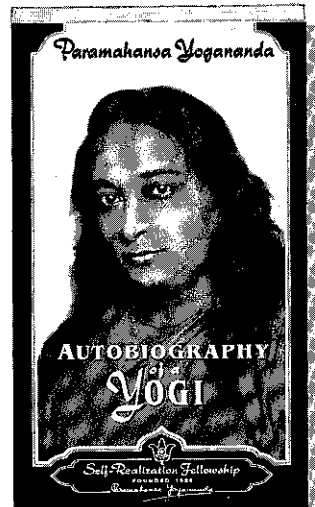
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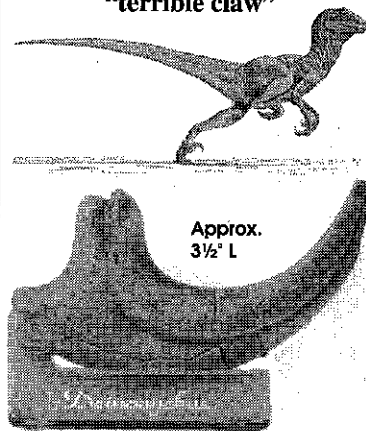
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import wine centuries earlier, first from the Etruscans in the seventh century B.C. and then from the Greek colony of Massalia, which was founded at the location of modern Marseille in ca. 600 B.C. The quantities were certainly smaller, but native settlements of the Early Iron Age in southern France have still turned up thousands of sherds of these vessels and several amphora-laden shipwrecks dating to this period have been found. Unfortunately, no written accounts dealing with drinking exist from this early time. Yet this is precisely the period that is critical if we are to understand the nature of Celtic drinking and the social institutions of which it was an integral part, and if we are to gain some insights into the reasons for the existence of the wine trade and developments following the introduction of this foreign beverage. This fact becomes especially clear when one considers that for centuries Celtic thirst was the main feature linking the Mediterranean states and the Celtic world: the wine trade was the principal focus of this colonial encounter, which had such important ramifications for Celtic social and cultural developments. To cite one minor example, the beautiful and exuberant Late Iron Age art style known as La Tène resulted from the borrowing and reinterpretation by Celtic craftsmen of motifs on imported wine-drinking paraphernalia. As the scholar J. M. DeNavaro put it, Celtic art "owed its existence to Celtic thirst." My own research has centered particularly on the origins of the wine trade during this crucial early period, and especially on understanding the nature and consequences of early Celtic thirst. In a nutshell, why was drinking so important to these people and why were they so interested in Mediterranean wine?

A number of modern scholars have approached the wine trade from a perspective called "Hellenization," a concept redolent of ancient Greek prejudices. This view sees the Celtic interest in wine as

an attempt to mimic Greek customs, including the ritualized wine-drinking party, the *symposium*, on the assumption that "barbarians" would automatically and enthusiastically imitate Greek culture whenever they had the privilege to be exposed to it. It is certainly true that Greek and Etruscan wine-drinking gear was imported by Early Iron Age peoples, but this was not part of a process of blanket emulation of Greeks. For one thing, the archaeological evidence makes it clear that wine and wine-drinking equipment were virtually the only elements they wished to borrow from Greek and other Mediterranean state cultures. Moreover, such a view misconstrues the roles that alcoholic beverages played in Celtic societies and it obscures the fact that there are significant variations in the nature of the wine-related items found in different regions and in their social significance.

A clearer understanding of the issue is best approached by placing Celtic drinking in a wider ethnographic and historical context. After all, the Celts were not engaged in some sort of aberrant social pathology; drinking alcohol has been an important part of the normal social and cultural life of most peoples around the world for several millennia. Such a comparative perspective shows us, first, that drinking is primarily a *social* act: it takes place where people interact, and it helps to establish and define relationships among them. As a proverb of the Buganda people of Uganda puts it "Friendship thrives on beer." Alcohol is closely associated with the practice of hospitality everywhere that it is used; and because of its psychoactive, behavior-altering properties, it is imbued with symbolic importance and very often is an integral part of religious ceremonies and other ritual activities (where inebriation is frequently an expected experience). Moreover, despite what might appear as drunken chaos to an uncomprehending outsider, the use of alcohol is quite strictly governed by cultural

rules—rules determining such things as who may drink together; when and where drinking takes place; what vessels are used when drinking in different contexts; and how people behave when they drink.

Drinking is also a prime political and economic tool. Hosting drinking events is an important means of establishing informal leadership and of maintaining political authority. Chiefs, for example, often have a responsibility to dispense generous amounts of drink as a matter of public hospitality. Among the Azande of Africa it is said that "A chief must know how to drink; he must get drunk often and thoroughly." In societies without chiefs, individuals may compete for prestige and political influence by this means. The Tarahumara of Mexico, for example, measure the prestige of a man by his ability to get as many people as possible drunk for as long as possible. Moreover, in societies with social classes, elite groups often distinguish themselves from others by drinking different beverages or using different drinking equipment.

Drinking also plays an important role in the economic sphere, especially in the mobilization of group labor through the institution of work-party feasts. This practice, of which the traditional American barn raising is a familiar example, is a common means of organizing work groups for agricultural labor, housebuilding, trade expeditions, and other such things in societies without wage labor. Volunteer workers are treated to a feast of drink and food in return for their help with a specific project.

If we return to our Early Iron Age case with these features in mind, it becomes easier to approach Celtic drinking practices and the wine trade without the parochial prejudices of ancient Greek and Roman commentators and to understand them as normal social phenomena. The archaeological record for this period indicates that we have to talk about at least two different regions when we discuss native

drinking. The first, known as the Western Hallstatt Zone, consists of eastern France, southwestern Germany, and Switzerland. The second consists of the lower Rhône basin of France (Provence and Eastern Languedoc), and is often called the "Ligurian" or "Celto-Ligurian" region. This latter area is much closer to the wine-producing regions from which imports were obtained; but it also differed markedly from the Hallstatt zone in terms of the political system that developed there.

In the Hallstatt zone one finds evidence of a markedly stratified social system with a developed form of political centralization—what is often called a "complex chiefdom" or an "early state." Large, fortified hilltop settlements, presumed to have been centers of political control, were surrounded by huge, elaborate, and extremely wealthy tumulus burials containing highly ornamented wagons, imported and native drinking and feasting equipment, gold jewelry, and other such things. The number of imported wine amphoras found in this region is extremely small in comparison to contemporary sites in southern France (and even more so in comparison to Late Iron Age sites in the same northern region). Imported Mediterranean drinking implements (especially pottery from Athens) are more numerous, but still relatively few. However, among those items that are found, particularly in the tumulus burials, are a number of spectacular pieces. The most famous example is perhaps the sixth-century B.C. Vix crater, the largest known bronze vessel from the ancient world. This enormous and beautiful vessel, of a type used for mixing wine and water in Greek contexts, stands well over five feet tall and has a capacity of almost 300 gallons. It was found 40 years ago in a lavish tumulus burial in Burgundy. A Greek bronze *dinos* (also used for wine-mixing by the Greeks) with cast bronze lions adorning the rim was found more recently in an even richer tumulus at Hochdorf, near Stuttgart (see *ARCHAEOLOGY*, November/Decem-

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ber 1987). Residues of mead found in the dinos demonstrate that it was used to consume indigenous forms of alcohol.

The relatively small number of imported Mediterranean drinking objects in the Hallstatt area, their often spectacularly impressive nature, and the fact that they are exclusively concentrated in a few lavish tombs and settlements believed to be seats of centralized political power suggest that their significance must lie in their incorporation into ostentatious rituals of drink consumption and feasting that symbolically marked off the elite segment of the social and political structure. For want of a sufficient volume to constitute regular trade, wine itself was not yet an important part of this process; but durable exotic wine-drinking gear, obtained sporadically from diverse sources through political networks, was used with native drinks to highlight elite drinking.

In contrast, the Early Iron Age archaeological evidence in southern France indicates a much more abundant and widespread consumption of imported wine, and quite a different social and political situation. There, a small, open, relatively undifferentiated village and hamlet settlement pattern tends to be the rule. Moreover, there is no identifiable hierarchical structuring of burials, and certainly nothing even approaching the lavish opulence of the major Hallstatt tumuli. Large, spectacular bronze drinking vessels are completely absent (despite the fact that several of those found in the Hallstatt area must have passed through this region on their way north from Marseille), and the abundant wine amphoras are not concentrated at a few major sites but are scattered, along with imported drinking ceramics, among the domestic debris of small settlements all over the lower Rhône basin.

What was the role of imported wine in this region of smaller-scale, less centralized political communities with a less hierarchical structuring of social relations? The anthropological perspective outlined earlier

points toward its incorporation into indigenous feasting, alongside other native forms of drink such as barley beer (which Pliny noted was called *cervestia*) and mead made from honey. It would have augmented such indigenous forms of drink in these traditional arenas of competition for prestige, informal political influence, and leadership roles. Wine could also have been employed to mobilize labor through its use in work-party feasts, and this labor could have been harnessed for agricultural or trade purposes.

The attractiveness of imported wine in this context would be that it provided an additional source of drink that could be used in these traditional feasting institutions without increasing the heavy demands for agricultural and brewing labor that are necessary for the production of native forms of drink. However, much as did the introduction of external wage labor in many modern colonial contact situations, this alien supply of wine most probably set off an escalation of feasting in the societies of the lower Rhône basin. This would have occurred because individuals (such as younger men) who were previously hampered in their ability to engage in political competition through feasting because of the constraints imposed by the lack of time, resources, and management skills necessary to mobilize large feasts, would suddenly have been able to obtain wine by providing labor services or goods to the Massaliotes. Hence, the pool of potential competitors was expanded as access to the means of hosting feasts was enlarged, and the result would be an escalation of competitive feasting. That this was so appears to be confirmed by the increasing quantities of amphoras at native settlements and by the associated expanding consumption of two new series of fine tablewares (including especially drinking-cups and pitchers) called Pseudo-Ionian and Gray Monochrome.

Taking an anthropological perspective on the issue of Celtic thirst provides several new insights into the Early Iron Age. In the first place, it

becomes clear that drinking was extremely important, for different reasons, in the stratified Hallstatt north and the more egalitarian south; and what was appropriate in the former was not in the latter. In both regions the use of wine and imported wine-drinking implements was definitely *not* part of a maladroit barbarian attempt to imitate the Mediterranean world. Imported goods were incorporated into native feasting rituals and practices in ways that conformed to the logic of the local culture and political economy. The prior existence of native forms of drink (beer and mead) indicates that the Celts already had in place well-established institutions governing the consumption of alcohol. Furthermore, the archaeological evidence indicates that drinking equipment had been an important status symbol for many native societies of western Europe since at least the Bronze Age, long before the wine trade began. Moreover, feasting and drinking were a vital part of funerary ritual for most European societies since the earliest agricultural societies.

It is time to take Celtic thirst seriously as an important feature of Iron Age societies and as a key to understanding the encounter between these indigenous societies of western Europe and the Mediterranean colonial powers. This can only be done if it is removed from the alien prejudices of ancient Greek and Roman commentators and viewed not as a social pathology or as a clumsy "barbarian" attempt to imitate the Greeks, but rather, as a normal cultural practice embedded in local social, economic, and political relations. ■

MICHAEL DIETLER is assistant professor of anthropology at Yale University. His main research focus is the "Celtic" societies of Iron Age Europe, and particularly the ancient wine trade and the colonial encounter in France. He is also engaged in the study of the manipulation of Celtic identity in modern Europe and an ethnoarchaeological study of material culture among the Luo people in Kenya.