

Archaeology of Beer and the Fluidity of Meaning.

Parkes, B., Johnson, I, Bruer, N., Lillis, E. and Thomas, T. (2017)

Paper presented at AAA Annual Conference, Melbourne, VIC, 6-8 December 2017.

Abstract

Beer, the nectar of the gods, has taken various guises through the ages, dependent upon geographic location, ingredients, techniques, technology and the brewers themselves. The ubiquitous nature of beer bottle glass in Australian historical sites belies its important role in early colonial society, but these archaeological remains are often a footnote in historical analyses. However, these analyses are essential in helping to understanding the constraints on trade, early colonial ingenuity and the beginnings of commerce – all wrapped up in a beer bottle. Given those constraints what did the beer actually taste like?

How did Australia's isolation affect the production and consumption of beer? Moreover, how is our modern understanding of beer different to those brewed in nineteenth century Australia? Can we know what nineteenth century beer was like? How can we evaluate interpretations of such a beer? These are by no means simple questions, and the answers are equally complex. What better medium could there be for Australian archaeologists to explore the ways in which they approach the archaeological record? Beer not only provides a wonderful vehicle for discussing how we interpret the past, it also provides a tangible means of experiencing different interpretations, using all of our senses. So come on a journey as we explore brewing and trade in colonial Australia and the variables that need to be considered in recreating a nineteenth century Australian beer. Perhaps you will be surprised by how beer can help lubricate the theoretical paradigms of archaeological analysis, stimulate a vigorous discussion of how we evaluate interpretations, ascribe meaning to objects and places, and provide insights to the dynamics of modern cultural heritage values.