Brewing cultures in early modern towns: an introduction

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Since Antiquity, fermented drinks have played an important role in European culture. In eastern and northern areas, ale - and from the close of the Middle Ages hopped beer - formed part of people's diets, provided livelihoods for rural alewives as well as urban brewers and accompanied countless forms of social exchange. These drinks came in different varieties and strengths, were consumed in large quantities (especially during feasts and rites of passage) and the potential consequences exercised secular and ecclesiastical authorities in great measure.[1]

The early modern centuries transformed Europe in fundamental respects. Population levels increased from about 75 million in 1500 to c.190 million in 1800, with disproportionate urban growth in areas like England and the Dutch Republic.[2] From the fifteenth century, state building entailed increasing central regulation of areas previously under manorial or municipal control. Such secular efforts at enhancing 'good police' coincided with the moral fervour of the Reformation(s) from the early 1500s, prompting all major confessions to monitor religious orthodoxy and moral behaviour more closely than ever before.[3] From about the same time, overseas expansion facilitated the globalization of market exchange and the gradual emergence of a consumer society, even in rural areas of the Continent. In the 1700s, the Enlightenment established 'reason', 'utility' and 'progress' as new yardsticks for all areas of public life, striving to enhance collective welfare and ultimately eroding the political foundations of the Ancien Régime.[4] Throughout, major military conflicts - ranging from the French Wars of Religion in the late sixteenth and the Thirty Years' War in the early seventeenth to the Seven Years' War in the mid-eighteenth century - disrupted social and economic life, albeit to a much less comprehensive extent than in the 'total wars' of the modern period.

In which ways did these processes impact on European brewing cultures? Recent work detects tendencies towards professionalization (of production, with increasing dominance of large urban breweries), commercialization (within the general context of urbanization and proto-capitalist economic relations) and - at best partially successful - attempts at

social disciplining (of consumers). Calvinist Churches in particular emphasized the need for discipline and godly behaviour - something that most definitely did not include the haunting of alehouses.[5] The Reformation - whose adoption shows an intriguing (albeit not total) correlation with beer-drinking regions[6] - also brought the end of monastic breweries and traditional fasting rules. Over and beyond the classic range of wine, beer, mead and cider, early modern consumers gained access to stronger drinks (especially brandy and gin) as well as colonial imports like tea, coffee and chocolate.[7] State building, however, rested very strongly on the proceeds of alcohol taxes, bringing authorities into a delicate balancing act between upholding 'the good order of the commonwealth' and maximizing sales for financial reasons.[8] Towards the end of the period, beer drinkers faced renewed calls for moderation, this time in the form of a secularized Enlightenment critique of unproductive lifestyles and the wasting of natural resources. Within the medical profession, meanwhile, responses to alcohol abuse shifted from mere moral censure towards the recognition of addiction as a clinical illness.[9]

This special issue of *Brewery History* illustrates different approaches to brewing cultures in southern England and eastern parts of the Holy Roman Empire, two of the most prominent European beer regions. Focusing on a diverse range of urban settings, including a capital, provincial towns and a port, the authors draw on recent doctoral work to exemplify the growing interest in the social and cultural history of the trade. James Brown and Katja Lindenau offer general surveys for Southampton and Görlitz in Upper Lusatia, Masatake Wasa reconstructs the operations of the university brewery of Frankfurt an der Oder in the late 1600s and Tim Reinke-Williams examines alehouse sociability in London from a gender perspective. Extrapolating from a wide range of archival materials (like brewery records, council minutes, government mandates, fiscal registers, court proceedings, wills, inventories and travel reports) as well as visual and material evidence, the articles provide both specific and more general conclusions. Some of the latter shall be briefly discussed here.

On the production side, we learn much about the economic and social status of the people who worked in the trade. At Görlitz, brewing was a fiercely defended prerogative of the urban elite who simultaneously monopolized town government, quite in contrast to Southampton, where humbler members of the middling sort and even women continued to play notable roles. Another difference between England and eastern Germany was the existence of formal monopolies, conveying individual brewers the exclusive right to supply certain areas. 'Tied' houses emerged in early modern England as well, but as a result of the commercial power of leading firms, not legal privileges granted by secular authorities.[10] 'Low-tech' procedures, dependence on volatile grain supplies, problems of

preservation and the strong influence of non-economic factors, which emerge from Wasa's account, may strike present-day readers as early modern peculiarities, while the need for clean water and skilled labour exemplifies some of the long-term continuities. Then as now, furthermore, architecturally distinctive brewery premises formed conspicuous urban landmarks.

In terms of retailing, the density of drinking outlets - especially in areas of widespread home-brewing - is astounding: according to calculations by Brown and Reinke-Williams, the ratio of alehouses to towndwellers could be as low as 1:12-13, while for Europe as a whole figures of 1:100 (market towns) and 1:200-300 (rural environments) were more typical.[12] Early modern publicans

Figure 1. The late gothic inn at Erdweg, located on a highway in the Bavarian district of Dachau, was first recorded in 1468 (when Rudolf and Katharina acted as keepers). On its multi-storey premises (which include a large first-floor hall used for weddings, assemblies and dances), beer has lubricated social exchange between locals and strangers for centuries. In addition, early modern landlords exercised baking, butchering and shopkeeping rights, accommodated travellers and collected tolls from a nearby bridge. Such establishments represented major economic assets. In 1621, the inn changed hands for 4,250 fl., the equivalent of 106,009 l. of beer or 21,250 days' pay for a labourer.[11] (Photo: Beat Kümin).

easily sold 1000s of litres of alcohol each year: for the Bavarian inn of Fahrenzhausen, to adduce an (extreme) example from another region, tax collectors recorded a staggering 37,400 l. of brown beer in the tax year of 1787-88 (on average 102 l. a day).[13] As if to counteract their potentially harmful social impact, Southampton publicans were charged with various types of poor relief. Görlitz diverged from the northern European trend to separate the brewing and retailing of beer in this period: it did have a small number of inns without production facilities, but also a rotation system allowing brewers to act as publicans for a few weeks each year.[14] Typological differences mattered not only in terms of distinct rights and services, which were most extensive in the period's multifunctional inns (Figure 1). As Reinke-Williams suggests in a close reading of one court case, London taverns may have been particularly suited for meetings of a public or professional nature, while alehouses afforded semi-private facilities for more informal and even sexual encounters. His article also underlines that, subject to certain informal conventions, women could be an active and assertive part of public house sociability.[15]

The articles underline the (situationally) high levels of consumption in premodern society. Depending on wealth, sex, age, profession and situation, personal intakes ranged from under 100 l. to over 1,000 l. a year, with average daily figures clustering around 1.5 l. in the sixteenth and 1 l. in the eighteenth century.[16] On the other hand, of course, beer played a very minor role in areas like the Mediterranean or the western Alps.[17] Whatever their precise requirements, early modern consumers certainly cared about the freshness and taste of their drink: double beer was the popular choice at Southampton and, in both Frankfurt and Görlitz, patrons swiftly shifted their allegiances if the quality of a product deteriorated (monopolies and cartels notwithstanding).

The differentiation between production, retailing and consumption is a helpful analytical tool, but in actual practice the spheres were inextricably intertwined. All of the articles highlight close interactions between brewers, publicans and drinkers, with personal networks (revealed e.g. in wills and sureties) and mutual dependencies (above all through the prevalence of credit) both within urban society and between town and country. Brewing was of the utmost importance for the socio-economic and political fortunes of these regions, despite variations like the survival of small-scale rural production (in England), an early concentration on specialized artisans (as in late medieval Bavaria) or restriction to a finite number of privileged premises (the roughly 100 *Brauhöfe* at Görlitz).[18] If we factor wine, viticulture and distilling into the equation, then drinks and drinking were clearly 'big business' in premodern Europe.

Much remains to be discovered. What, for example, were the cultural attributes

of different alcoholic beverages in this period? Where consumers encountered extensive choice, as in upmarket urban inns, the more expensive (foreign) wines naturally appealed to more prosperous patrons, but what exactly did contemporaries associate with specific beverages, why did they choose some rather than others on specific occasions and to what extent did this choice affect the atmosphere? Helpful impressions derive from early modern literary reflections, but can further clues be found in court records and diaries?[19] Another worthwhile area of investigation might be regions and periods experiencing shifts in the prominence of certain beverages, e.g. where viticulture became unviable during the 'Little Ice Age' from the late 1500s or where growing market exchange and proto-tourism presented areas with unprecedented demand for unfamiliar drinks. Social and cultural approaches, therefore, promise valuable new insights into the history of beer and brewing, not just for the early modern period.

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