Ancient history of sexual arousal and alcohol^A

Alex O. Holcombe
School of Psychology, University of Sydney

The Modern Context

Alcohol risks
sex, aggression

• When beer is cheaper, STD incidence is higher^1
• Alcohol use is strongly associated with murder and rape^2,3
• Alcohol marketing highlights sexual associations

Laboratory experiments suggest that alcohol’s association with sexual arousal and aggression is culturally mediated rather than pharmacological — because we expect alcohol to yield sexual arousal and aggression, it does

• Drinking increases sexual arousal and aggression in men via an expectancy effect:
  When both alcohol content of a drink and whether it is believed to contain alcohol are manipulated, belief best predicts aggression and sexual arousal, not alcohol ingestion itself^4-6
• The expectancy effect is so strong that exposure to alcohol-related cues is sufficient to elicit sexual arousal and hostility, drinking is not necessary^7

Why should we care about ancient history?

• The feasibility of changing the alcohol-sex and alcohol-aggression expectancy may depend on how deeply rooted these expectancies are in our culture
• The ancient history (see evidence below) suggests that the expectancy is unfortunately very deeply rooted, as it is at least 2000 years old

The Bible and associated scriptures show the existence of a strong expectation 2000 years ago that drinking alcohol causes sexual arousal^8 and aggression

For if a man drink wine to drunkenness, he disturbeth his mind with filthy thoughts to fornication, and exciteh his body to carnal union; and if the cause of the desire be present, he worketh the sin, and is not ashamed
Testament of Judah, verse 14

And when they are in their cups, they forget their love both to friends and brethren, and a little after draw out swords
1 Enfads 3:22

So the brain, dazzied by drunkenness, falls down from above, with a great fall to the liver and the heart, that is, to voluptuousness and anger: as the sons of the poets say Hephaestus was hurled by Zeus from heaven to earth.
Clement of Alexandria, 2nd century CE

Lot’s daughters encourage their father to drink, part of a plan to induce him to have sex with them (Genesis 19:30)

The Ancient Context

• Alcoholic drinks in Biblical times were weaker than wine or liquor today— the strongest was only 3-11% alcohol, yet still the authors of scripture were very concerned.
• In contrast to expectations of the effects of alcohol, which seems not to have changed much over the last 2000 years, other attitudes have changed enormously.
  • Alcohol was used heavily in religious contexts, and thus had a sacred association, but today few of us are impressed by the sacredness of alcohol.
  • Fertility rituals involving sexual intercourse (Genesis 15:15,20) are evidence of a very different attitude towards sex.
• The mass killing advocated in the Bible (Deuteronomy 7:1-2, Joshua 6:21, etc.) is condoning of slavery shows attitudes very different from those today

Conclusion: Given their long life, changing sexual arousal and aggression expectations may be more difficult than other potential ways to reduce the unwanted correlates of alcohol use

References

^A The Bible and associated scriptures show the existence of a strong expectation 2000 years ago that drinking alcohol causes sexual arousal and aggression.

1 Enfads 3:22
2 Genesis 15:15,20
3 Joshua 6:21
4 Enfads 9:9, 9:12
5 Testament 20:1-7
6 Numbers 20:15
7 Testament 5:1-2
8 Testament 28:1-6

At the Marriage of Cana (Rijksmuseum, 15th century), Jesus changes water into wine.