A HISTORY of the WORLD
in 6 GLASSES

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Vital Fluids

There is no history of mankind, there are only many histories of all kinds of aspects of human life.

—Karl Popper, philosopher of science (1902-94)

THIRST is DEADLIER than hunger. Deprived of food, you might survive for a few weeks, but deprived of liquid refreshment, you would be lucky to last more than a few days. Only breathing matters more. Tens of thousands of years ago, early humans foraging in small bands had to remain near rivers, springs, and lakes to ensure an adequate supply of freshwater, since storing or carrying it was impractical. The availability of water constrained and guided humankind's progress. Drinks have continued to shape human history ever since.

Only in the past ten thousand years or so have other beverages emerged to challenge the preeminence of water. These drinks do not occur naturally in any quantity but must be made deliberately. As well as offering safer alternatives to contaminated, disease-ridden water supplies in human settlements, these new beverages have taken on a variety of roles. Many of them have been used as currencies, in religious rites, as political symbols, or as sources of philosophical and artistic inspiration. Some have served to highlight the power and status of the elite, and others to subjugate or appease the downtrodden. Drinks have been used to celebrate births, commemorate deaths, and forge and strengthen social bonds; to seal business transactions and treaties; to sharpen the senses or dull the mind; to convey lifesaving medicines and deadly poisons.

As the tides of history have ebbed and flowed, different drinks have come to prominence in different times, places, and cultures, from stone-age villages to ancient Greek dining rooms or Enlightenment coffeehouses. Each one became popular when it met a particular need or aligned with a historical trend; in some cases, it then went on to influence the course of history in unexpected ways. Just as archaeologists divide history into different periods based on the use of different materials—the stone age, the bronze age, the iron age, and so on—it is also possible to divide world history into periods dominated by different drinks. Six beverages in particular—beer, wine, spirits, coffee, tea, and cola—chart the flow of world history. Three contain alcohol, and three contain caffeine, but what
they all have in common is that each one was the defining drink during a pivotal historical period, from antiquity to the present day.

The event that set humankind on the path toward modernity was the adoption of farming, beginning with the domestication of cereal grains, which first took place in the Near East around ten thousand years ago and was accompanied by the appearance of a rudimentary form of beer. The first civilizations arose around five thousand years later in Mesopotamia and Egypt, two parallel cultures founded on a surplus of cereal grains produced by organized agriculture on a massive scale. This freed a small fraction of the population from the need to work in the fields and made possible the emergence of specialist priests, administrators, scribes, and craftsmen. Not only did beer nourish the inhabitants of the first cities and the authors of the first written documents, but their wages and rations were paid in bread and beer, as cereal grains were the basis of the economy.

The flourishing culture that developed within the city-states of ancient Greece in the first millennium BCE spawned advances in philosophy, politics, science, and literature that still underpin modern Western thought. Wine was the lifeblood of this Mediterranean civilization, and the basis of vast seaborne trade that helped to spread Greek ideas far and wide. Politics, poetry, and philosophy were discussed at formal drinking parties, or symposia, in which the participants drank from a shared bowl of diluted wine. The spread of wine drinking continued under the Romans, the structure of whose hierarchical society was reflected in a minutely calibrated pecking order of wines and wine styles. Two of the world's major religions issued opposing verdicts on the drink: The Christian ritual of the Eucharist has wine at its center, but following the collapse of the Roman Empire and the rise of Islam, wine was banned in the very region of its birth.

The rebirth of Western thought a millennium after the fall of Rome was sparked by the rediscovery of Greek and Roman knowledge, much of which had been safeguarded and extended by scholars in the Arab world. At the same time, European explorers, driven by the desire to circumvent the Arab monopoly on trade with the East, sailed west to the Americas and east to India and China. Global sea routes were established, and European nations vied with one another to carve up the globe. During this Age of Exploration a new range of beverages came to the fore, made possible by distillation, an alchemical process known in the ancient world but much improved by Arab scholars. Distilled drinks provided
alcohol in a compact, durable form ideal for sea transport. Such drinks as brandy, rum, and whiskey were used as currency to buy slaves and became particularly popular in the North American colonies, where they became so politically contentious that they played a key role in the establishment of the United States.

Hard on the heels of this geographic expansion came its intellectual counterpart, as Western thinkers looked beyond long-held beliefs inherited from the Greeks and devised new scientific, political, and economic theories. The dominant drink of this Age of Reason was coffee, a mysterious and fashionable beverage introduced to Europe from the Middle East. The establishments that sprung up to serve coffee had a markedly different character from taverns that sold alcoholic drinks, and became centers of commercial, political, and intellectual exchange. Coffee promoted clarity of thought, making it the ideal drink for scientists, businessmen, and philosophers. Coffeehouse discussions led to the establishment of scientific societies, the founding of newspapers, the establishment of financial institutions, and provided fertile ground for revolutionary thought, particularly in France.

In some European nations, and particularly in Britain, coffee was challenged by tea imported from China. Its popularity in Europe helped to open lucrative trade routes with the East and underpinned imperialism and industrialization on an unprecedented scale, enabling Britain to become the first global superpower. Once tea had established itself as Britain's national drink, the desire to maintain the tea supply had far-reaching effects on British foreign policy, contributing to the independence of the United States, the undermining of China's ancient civilization, and the establishment of tea production in India on an industrial scale.

Although artificially carbonated beverages originated in Europe in the late eighteenth century, the soft drink came into its own with the invention of Coca-Cola one hundred years later. Originally devised as a medicinal pick-me-up by an Atlanta pharmacist, it became America's national drink, an emblem of the vibrant consumer capitalism that helped to transform the United States into a superpower. Traveling alongside American servicemen as they fought wars around the world during the twentieth century, Coca-Cola went on to become the world's most widely known and distributed product and is now an icon of the controversial march toward a single global marketplace.

Drinks have had a closer connection to the flow of history than is generally acknowledged, and a greater influence on its course. Understanding the
ramifications of who drank what, and why, and where they got it from, requires
the traversal of many disparate and otherwise unrelated fields: the histories of
agriculture, philosophy, religion, medicine, technology, and commerce. The six
beverages highlighted in this book demonstrate the complex interplay of different
civilizations and the interconnectedness of world cultures. They survive in our
homes today as living reminders of bygone eras, fluid testaments to the forces
that shaped the modern world. Uncover their origins, and you may never look at
your favorite drink in quite the same way again.
BEER in MESOPOTAMIA and EGYPT