TWO HISTORICAL CASE HISTORIES
OF ACUTE ALCOHOLISM IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE

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Il n'y a pas une civilisation qui n'ait trouvé
sa ou ses solutions au problème de la bois-
son, particulièrement celui des boissons
alcooliques

1. DRUNKENNESS, ALCOHOLISM AND ANCIENT HISTORY
(By Christian Laes)

According to Pliny the Elder, the two liquids most delightful to the human
body were wine for the inner part and olive oil for the outer. To him, wine
was the Roman liquid *par excellence*, while beer belonged to the West (Gaul
and Spain), and to Egypt. The Romans were indeed strenuous consumers
of wine. Consumption in the city of Rome has been estimated in the range
of 146–182 litres per adult head per annum, with a possible increase in the
second century CE. This works out at something like a modern bottle per
day for adults—the same rate as documented consumption in other pre-
industrial wine drinking societies. Moreover, wine was an affordable product,
even for the less well-to-do.

In the words of Pliny again, it is a dangerous product:

If anyone will take the trouble duly to consider the matter, he will find that
upon no one subject is the industry of man kept more constantly on the alert
than upon the making of wine; as if Nature had not given us water as a beverage,
the one, in fact, of which all other animals make use. We, on the other hand,
even go so far as to make our very beasts of burden drink wine: so vast are our
efforts, so vast our labours, and so boundless the cost which we thus lavish
upon a liquid which deprives man of his reason and drives him to frenzy and

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1 Braudel (1979) 212.
2 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 14, 149–150.
3 Tchernia (1986); Jongman (2007) 603.
to the commission of a thousand crimes! So great, however, are its attractions, that a great part of mankind are of opinion that there is nothing else in life worth living for.

Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 14, 137 (trans. J. Bostock and H. Riley)

This quote is just the beginning of a whole chapter on drunkenness and its inherent dangers. It contains striking passages, such as the following admonition to heavy drinkers:

And how many a man has met his death in this fashion! Indeed, it has become quite a common proverb, that “in wine there is truth.” Should he, however, fortunately escape all these dangers, the drunkard never beholds the rising sun, by which his life of drinking is made all the shorter. From wine, too, comes that pallid hue, those drooping eyelids, those sore eyes, those tremulous hands, unable to hold with steadiness the overflowing vessel, consign punishment in the shape of sleep agitated by Furies during the restless night, and, the supreme reward of inebriety, those dreams of monstrous lustfulness and of forbidden delights. Then on the next day there is the breath reeking of the wine-cask, and a nearly total obliviousness of everything, from the annihilation of the powers of the memory. And this, too, is what they call “seizing the moments of life”! whereas, in reality, while other men lose the day that has gone before, the drinker has already lost the one that is to come.


Pliny then continues with historical examples of heavy drinkers, a catalogue that ends with the triumvir Marcus Antonius, who was said to have published a volume on his own drunkenness.

An ample bibliography already exists both on heavy drinking and drunkenness, and on the possible existence of alcoholism in the ancient world. Examples are abundant: from the Ancient Testament admonitions against heavy drinking, to the Greek historiographer Procopius who wrote in the sixth century CE on Theoderic’s grandson who drank too much, or about a general who lost selfcontrol due to “the disease of drunkenness”. From a

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6 For overviews, see Gourevitch (1991 a); D’Arms (1995); Clarysse (2001); Dalby (2003) 123–124. Both d’Arms and Clarysse are sceptical about the existence of alcoholism in the ancient world. See Gourevitch (1998) on addiction. Neither these studies nor the present article will engage with the vast field involving connections between wine consumption, drunkenness and Christianity, for which see e.g. Lançon (1990) and Bailey (2007).
7 E.g. Gen. 9, 20–27 (Noah’s drunkeness); 1Sam. 25, 36–38 (Nabal’s drunkeness); Tob. 4, 15; Prov. 23, 20–21; 23, 29–35; Sirach 31, 25–31; Jes. 5, 11–12; 19, 14; 28, 7–8 (severe admonitions against overindulgence and drunkenness due to wine).
8 Procopius, *De bello Gothico* 5, 3, 10 (*Theoderic’s grandson*); 7, 27, 5 (*νόσω μέθης ἄνεμένος*).