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ARCHAEOLOGISTS DISCOVER 6,000-YEAR-OLD “BEER HENGE” IN MAINE

UNION, Maine, April 1, 2024 – Visitors to The Pour Farm brewery in Union, Maine have long enjoyed their beer in the presence of an enigmatic stone marker that stands guard in front of the brewery. It turns out they may be reenacting an ancient ritual that prehistoric residents first performed here 6,000 years ago.

Scientists from the University of Maine and Bowdoin College today announced the discovery of a “Beer Henge” – a site where beer fermentation and ritual beer drinking may have taken place, and one of the oldest examples of agricultural activity in North America. Their findings appear in the latest issue of *American Journal of Prehistoric Fermentation* [April, 2024].

Originally thought to be a 19th century mile marker—the kind widely used throughout New England to mark boundaries and distances—the stone is in fact a much earlier megalith, predating even the Red Paint People who inhabited parts of coastal Maine from 3000 BCE to 1000 BCE.

During a chance visit to The Pour Farm brewery last summer, archaeologist and beer drinker Amber Frothfield noticed a pattern of earthworks around the stone, and had a hunch they might be a sign of something related to beer. She approached brewery owner, Bill Stinson, who agreed to temporarily fence off the area and sponsor a dig. The brewery was closed for the next six months while Frothfield’s team worked to solve the mystery.

The term *henge* usually refers to a type of earthwork of the Neolithic period, typically consisting of a circular or oval-shaped bank with an internal ditch, often with a corresponding ring of monument stones. Henges are thought to have been used for rituals or astronomical observations – for example, marking the equinox when sun rays beam precisely through a configuration of stones.



But in contrast to a multi-stone henge, the Union henge features a single monolith, which by definition means it lines up with *everything all the time*. Frothfield hypothesized that early beer brewers and drinkers may have built an “always on” monument to highlight the cultural and religious significance of their newly developed beverage (and so they didn’t have to wait around for an equinox for something cool to happen).

The team also uncovered evidence of fermentation at the site, i.e., traces of barley-based alcohol and yeast sedimentation, in stone mortars that were carved into the bedrock about three feet underground. The holes were most likely used for storing, crushing, and fermenting barley into a beer-like beverage. The scientists used radiocarbon dating to estimate the age of the ancient beer garden, and determined it was constructed shortly after the last ice age, when humans first appeared in the archeological record in North America.

As one of the oldest verified sites of agricultural activity in North America, The Pour Farm’s “Beer Henge” has been proposed as a UNESCO World Heritage site.

Although the present Pour Farm brewery has been open for a little more than five years, Stinson says he always had a feeling that people have been drinking beer at The Pour Farm for a very long time. “Six thousand years down. Six thousand to go.”