

**Ancient Agriculture**  
**Part III: Ancient Greece**

by C. Mundigler

While it is clear that agriculture had its foundation and early development in the Near East, it is not entirely clear how this development spread from the east to the Neolithic cultures of the west. Archaeological evidence shows us that as early as 6000 B.C. settlements in Macedonia and Greece cultivated wheat, barley, lentils and peas, and domesticated livestock such as sheep, pigs, goats and cattle. This settled lifestyle of cultivation of plants and domestication of animals would have led to a division of labour, and would have set in motion a new, stratified and specialized social order within Greece, as it did in the early Near Eastern cultures.

The basic economic strength of Greece was in its agriculture. While Greek farms were able to produce wine, oil, barley, wheat, wool and cheese to make themselves more or less self-sufficient, much of their grain had to be imported from the Black Sea region. The reason for this is really quite simple - geography. While many of the lands of the Near East have large river systems which regularly flood, enrich and irrigate the surrounding farm land, Greece has, at best, inadequate streams, many of which dry up completely in the summer. Greece is also far more mountainous than the Near Eastern lands, and, in some places, slopes and narrow valleys are the only arable land. The only way to cultivate crops in this kind of terrain is to terrace-farm; while this may be effective to a certain extent, it is also very labour intensive, and most Greek districts of the mainland had to import much of their grain and live at a subsistence level for most of their other produce, except perhaps grapes and olives. The Spartan districts around Messenia and Laconia, on the other hand, had much more arable farm land and were almost wholly self-sufficient, except in times of lengthy wars.

As time went on and population increased, many areas of Greece were no longer able to meet the needs of the growing masses and the importation of wheat became a dire necessity. This set up the basis for an extensive import / export enterprise with incoming grain being exchanged for exported olives, oil and wine. This, in turn, caused a change in the social structure of Greece, for as more grain was imported, less time had to be

devoted to trying to meet the needs of the local citizenry and people were able to specialize in trades and crafts. This same scenario was repeated throughout history in most developing civilizations of the ancient world.

In 594 BC, the Athenian statesman Solon encouraged the cultivation of olives and grapes for oil and wine, and forbade citizens to export wheat and other cereals. Through these steps, oil and wine in large amphora pots flowed out of Athens, destined for trade with Egypt and the Black Sea in exchange for vital supplies of grain. The importance of olive oil, however, dates to long before Solon, when it was used for lubrication, lighting, cooking and in place of soap for cleaning. Wine, like oil, was one of the most important commodities in Greece. The Greek soil was well suited for the production of wine grapes which, when harvested, were usually pressed with bare feet in vats which allowed the wine to flow into smaller amphorae, sealed with resin. This resin must have given the wine a unique flavour, which can still be found in Greek wines, such as Retsina, today.

Along with the daily consumption of wine, the Greeks seem to have enjoyed a wide variety of other home-grown produce: beans, lettuce, beets, cabbage, celery, onions, cucumbers, radishes, lentils, asparagus and leeks were among the farm-fresh vegetables available, and apples, dates, almonds, figs, pears and plums could be found at many tables. The staple diet of the average farmer seems to have been barley bread, cheese, diluted wine and fish. Milk and cheese were provided by domestic sheep and goats, but unless these animals were unproductive or injured, Greek families rarely ate meat with their bread, cheese and vegetables.

Little changed from year to year in the life of the farmer. Hesiod, a Greek poet and farmer living around 700 B.C., left us one of the few surviving works on agriculture from ancient Greece, his Works and Days, which recounts the yearly routine endured by the farmers. Hesiod tells us that ploughing was done in October to work the soil and enable it to retain the rains which began about the same time. This was no easy job since the ploughs used in ancient Greece did not turn the soil over, but simply furrowed the earth which then had to be worked by hand. This was followed by sowing, also done by hand. In February and March, the farmer pruned his vines, and by May it was time to start harvesting. Reaping was done with a hand-sickle and threshing on a circular paved area where horses, mules or oxen tread on the grain until the kernels were separated from the chaff. Winnowing was done when the grain, after threshing, was thrown into the air allowing the wind to carry off the chaff while the grain fell to mats on the ground. The grain was then stored in jars for later use, and was ground into flour only as needed.

Just as the Greeks were tied to their land, religious holidays and festivals were inextricably linked to the agricultural calendar. Celebrations, initiations, sacrifices, ploughing, sowing and harvesting all depended on the gods, the feasts and the seasons. Farming was directly responsible for the very livelihood and maintenance of Greek society, and agriculture dictated what Greece would develop into, and how it would get there - its potentials, its possibilities and its limits.