

Ancient Olive Oil Production -
The Near East, Part II

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In the last issue of *Labyrinth*, we looked at the various regions and methods of olive oil production in the ancient Near East. As was described, some areas, such as Assyria, grew no olives (Herodotus, *Histories*, 1.193) but produced sesame seed oil instead to meet their needs. Other areas, such as Egypt, imported olive oil from neighbouring regions until managing to successfully grow their own olives in Ptolemaic times.

The trade, barter and import of olive oil into Egypt played a large part in the economy of the entire eastern Mediterranean. Using Palestine and Syria as two of the major trade routes from Phoenician ports and Mediterranean islands, Egypt was able to supply most of its needs for oil and other goods towards the end of the Old Kingdom Dynasty VI under Pepi II (around 2200 BC). Prior to that, oil was brought into Egypt from neighbouring Libya in late pre-dynastic times.

It is from the Bible, however, that we learn of some of the numbers involved in the trade payments in the ancient Near East. In 1 Kings 5:11 we are told of individuals such as Solomon paying the equivalent of some 125,000 bushels of wheat and 1,162,000 gallons of olive oil each year in exchange for artisans, purple cloth and glass brought in by Phoenician traders.

Around 1300 BC, during the Mycenaean era, extensive trade took place between Egypt and the Greek world of mainland Mycenae. From at least the New Kingdom Pharaonic dynasty of Amenophis III (around 1400 BC) to the end of the 19th Dynasty (around 1200 BC), grain from Egypt

changed hands with merchants bringing olive oil to the Levant. This trade of Egyptian grain for oil continued well into Classical times and the commerce provided by this trade was essential to the growth and development of all of the coming Mediterranean "superpowers".

While many ancient Egyptian texts refer to olive oil as a standard product of trade alongside grain, many others relate the military tribute paid by Egyptian soldiers when celebrating glorious campaign victories. Twigs from the olive were frequently offered at sacred altars in conjunction with animal sacrifice and other offerings of wine, incense and the like.

Beyond the military tribute use of the olive in the ancient Near East, it also served a purpose in sacred and ritual activities in the Old World as well. Dating from about the tenth century BC, a remarkable installation at Tel Dan, in northern Israel, has been identified as a possible ritual olive oil pressing facility in connection with other so-called "temple industries" at the site (Lawrence Stager and Samuel Wolff, "Production and Commerce in Temple Courtyards: An Olive Press in the Sacred Precinct at Tel Dan", *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* (BASOR):243, 1981). The Bible has numerous references to the ritual use of olive oil, including the anointment of kings at their coronations (1 Kings 1:39). Other ritual uses of oil found in connection with the Bible and sacred "temple industries" were libation offerings and fuel for sanctuary lamps. We will come across these same uses again in the next issue of *Labyrinth* when we look at the use of this resource in ancient Greece.

We are told in Exodus 27:20 and again in Leviticus 24:2 that only the purest olive oil was to be used in the sacred temples of Old Testament times. Beyond ritual, however, the practical reason for burning the purest oil available was that it emits almost no smoke when burned in the ancient clay and stone lamps. This may explain why no soot has been found on the walls and ceilings of early Near Eastern sacred rooms, tombs and hallways where the purest of the pure would have been burned. In the Koran of the Muslim faith, which began in the Near East as well, we find reference to "a blessed tree, an olive neither of the east nor of the west, the oil of which would well-nigh give light though no fire touched it" (Chapter of Light. XXIV.Medinah).

Besides anointment, libation and lighting, olive oil was used for offerings on altars in the Biblical Near East as well. In Numbers 28:5 and Exodus 29:40, we are told that the oil was mixed with fine flour for temple

offerings. There may even have been a burgeoning industry in selling the purest of olive oils to pilgrims and devotees for just such offerings.

In passing from this world to the next, the Egyptian Book of the Dead tells us to "advance straightway on the City which is to the North of the Olive Tree" (Address to the Gods of the Tuat, Papyrus of Nu, BM10477:24). It is obvious by this that the olive was a sacred and revered plant used as a divine landmark for such an important journey.

Sacred uses aside, olive oil was also used for more down-to-earth reasons as well, from cooking and cosmetics to ointments and embalming. Throughout the "Promised Land" of the ancient Near East, olive oil was used to keep people's hair and skin healthy and supple. While the upper classes scented their olive oil cosmetics with expensive imported additives, the poorer working class simply rubbed the oil into their hair and onto their skin to give them the same benefits. Olive oil, of course, is still used today in modern kitchens throughout the Middle East, just as it has been for countless centuries before us.

Speaking of kitchens, Egypt has been well-endowed for many generations now with not just oranges, peaches, pomegranates and grapes, but also with olives from the same oases that supplied these fruits for its tables. The Faiyum oasis, for example, is a lush and fertile area in the Egyptian desert some 80 miles south of Cairo. To this day, and for thousands of years, this oasis has been fed by an intricate artificial canal system measuring more than 200 miles in length which connects it to the Nile and brings life-sustaining water to the crops there, thanks, some say, to Joseph of Biblical fame.

With all this activity in the use and trade of olive oil in the eastern Mediterranean, it is only natural that we next turn our attention to an area which not only provided oil to Egypt in exchange for grain, but later would take over Egypt itself - ancient Greece.