

Ancient Wine Production - Egypt, Part I by Chris Mundigler

"Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging: and whosoever is deceived thereby is not wise" (Proverbs 20.1)--so says the Bible of the generic beverage called "wine" (in those days referring to both grape juice and the fermented grape wine). While the Lord told Moses to call upon the Israelites to "seperate [themselves] from wine" and not to "drink any liquor of grapes" (Numbers 6.3), it was more likely true that the general populace of the ancient Near East did, in fact, drink a great deal of wine, not so much for its alcoholic qualities, but out of sheer necessity--water was, and still is, a fairly scarce commodity in the deserts of the Near East, and what water there is is all too often contaminated beyond drinking. Wine, therefore, served as a pleasant alternative to water in many regions of the ancient Mediterranean and Near East.

To fully understand the process by which the Greeks and Romans produced their renowned wines, we will first look at one region where, some 5000 years ago, wine was being made along the Nile River which the Greeks themselves would later praise for its excellence of taste and sacrificial significance. Long before the Ptolemaic Greeks ruled the already ancient land which was the "Gift of the Nile", wine was being produced in great quantities, mostly for the distinguished palates of the nobles and kings of Mesopotamia and Egypt--the

common man rarely had the chance to partake of grape wine, but instead had to content himself with date-palm wine or "barley-wine" which we will discuss in the next issue of *Labyrinth*.

The frequent and common depiction of vine cultivation and grape gathering in tomb paintings, sculptures and hieroglyphics from sites such as Beni-Hassan and Thebes in ancient Egypt, indicates wide-spread and sophisticated viticulture [grape-growing] techniques, many of which have lasted thousands of years to the present. While grapes were not the only source of wine for the ancient Egyptians, by far they produced the most coveted wine varieties. Most of the varieties of grapes grown in the region of the Nile matured and ripened in late June and early July, by our modern calendar, and yet for the delicate grapes so prized by the upper-class Egyptians, the annual life-giving inundation and deposit of alluvial soil that was the gift of the Nile at about the same time, was not a welcome event. Grapes of the delicate quality so often praised by ancient authors find the growing conditions too harsh in the otherwise agriculturally-rich mud left behind by the receding Nile. These grapes require a more gravel-based soil such as that found beyond the ancient flood zones of the Nile Valley. Areas such as the Faiyum Oasis southwest of Cairo, for instance, had extensive and excellent vineyards beyond the reach of the Nile but still well irrigated by man-made canals. Evidence for these elaborate vineyards, water channels and hydraulic systems can still be found throughout the Faiyum today, testifying to the ingenuity and engineering skills of those ancient vintners.

Viticulture was practised both on a large scale in the Delta region of the Nile and various oases, as well as on smaller garden estates which dotted northern Egypt. Tomb paintings and sculptures show that in both cases, the grape vines were trained along wooden beams, trellis networks or grouped into bowers which were often supported by forked columns for ease of access and pruning (see accompanying diagram). The Egyptian hieroglyphic symbol for a vineyard (shown in the insert of the diagram) indicates how common and accepted the rafter-and-column training method must have been.

As for the vineyards themselves, these often included a water reservoir to irrigate the vines as well as the necessary winepresses for processing the harvested grapes (and which we will look at in the next issue of *Labyrinth* as well). Most of the watering of the vineyards, however, took place from continually-fed irrigation ditches, channels and pools, filled from the Nile itself using various water-lifting devices (as described in *Labyrinth* issue 52), most notably using the shaduf, which is still in use today. Many branches of these irrigation ditches with their accompanying hydraulic devices which fed the nobles' vineyards can still be seen today in regions such as the Faiyum near the west bank of the Nile.

The Egyptians not only used their ingenuity to devise methods of irrigating their grape vines but also to gather the fruits of their labour. Tomb paintings from Beni-Hassan, south of the Faiyum region, show monkeys gathering grapes and figs for their human "assistants" below. According to the paintings and relief sculptures, however, it seems that the simians helped themselves to as much of the fruit for their own appetites as they handed down to the vintners below. More commonly the grapes were very deliberately placed into wicker baskets which were then carried on the heads of the workers, or slung on shoulder yokes and transported to the nearby winepresses for processing.

The excellence of Egyptian wines, whether due to unusually fertile soil, remarkable varieties of grapes or simply the vintner's expertise, has been alluded to by numerous ancient sources. From Strabo in the first century BC to Pliny in the first century AD and Athenaeus in the third century AD, all proclaim Egypt's wines as remarkable in sweetness, colour and fragrance, aging extremely well and likened by

Athenaeus to Attic honey. Pliny and others also described the medicinal and sacrificial uses of these remarkable Egyptian wines. The wines of the Nile Delta region were held in high regard, especially for their medicinal qualities, with certain vintages considered useful for specific ailments. Just as important, and just as specific to the ancient Egyptians, was the use of various types of wine for sacrificial purposes. Both Herodotus in the fifth century BC and Plutarch in the first century AD recount the use of wines in sacrificial offerings throughout various regions of Egypt, some wines extolled by the priests, some forbidden, some to be used sparingly, others for daily consumption. In numerous sculptures still found in Egypt today as many as four different vintages of wine were used in individual ceremonies as libations to please the departed, the gods, or simply to procure specific favours for specific requests.

Despite the wide use of grape wines by pharaohs and nobles alike for imbibement, medicinal and sacrificial purposes, and no matter how those grapes were grown and harvested, grapes were not the only fruit used for wine, nor was this the end of the wine processing procedure. In the next issue we will look at the pressing, storage and transport of the many varieties of Egyptian wines as well as the Greek and Roman connection with the Near Eastern wine trade.