

In the last issue of *Labyrinth*, we looked at the wines of the nobles, pharaohs and general populace of the ancient Near East and Egypt, as well as the medicinal and sacrificial uses of these 'nectars of the gods'. Vine cultivation and viticulture techniques, as discussed, evolved into a sophisticated art, but this was by no means the end of the wine production, storage and trading process.

There were many different kinds of wine produced in the Near East, for use mostly by the nobles, but what of the private individuals and their thirst for a better life? In Egypt, private citizens had no restrictions placed on them when it came to the use of wine in their everyday lives. Even women were allowed to indulge, and in this regard the Egyptians differed greatly from the Romans of antiquity. In early Roman times, females were forbidden the privilege of drinking wine, as were young men under the age of thirty, except at sacrifices. In later Roman times it was still somewhat disgraceful for a woman to drink in public, yet this restriction never seemed to occupy the Egyptian mentality. So great was the consumption of wine in Egypt, in fact, that in the time of Herodotus (around 450 BC) the quantity of wine used in Egypt far exceeded the amount that Egypt could produce, and enormous quantities of wine had to be imported from Phoenicia and Greece. Wealthy and poor alike, male and female, enjoyed their wine, and often to excess--many relief carvings and paintings exist from Beni-Hassan for instance, that show men and women disgorging to extremes and having to be carried home by servants after overindulging at drinking parties.

While grape-wine was by far the most coveted alcoholic beverage of the nobles of ancient Egypt, being imported not only from Greece and Phoenicia but also from Libya, Palestine and Syria in vast quantities, the most popular "wine" of the general masses was the barley-wine mentioned by Greek and Latin writers such as Strabo, Herodotus, and Diodorus. Described as "zythus" by these early historians, the method of brewing barley-wine or beer is also depicted on the walls of early

Fifth Dynasty Egyptian tombs. These tomb paintings from 2400 BC show thick loaves of wheat and barley bread which were baked in ovens and then allowed to ferment naturally in water. Beer in itself has been a staple of human life for thousands of years in the Old World and well deserves an entire article in a future issue of *Labyrinth*.

Wine jars in Egypt have been found as far back as the First Dynasty of 3000 BC and contained mostly a red variety, while the Middle Kingdom wines from around 2000 BC were generally white. Some of the earliest wines found in Mesopotamia and Egypt, however, come from the date-palm variety since palm trees grew extremely well in the ancient Near East. Dates, which are naturally rich in sugar, ferment very readily in warm climates and from well before 3000 BC people were processing palm-wine date mash in large jars and then straining the fermented drink into separate storage containers for later use or transport. Whether palm, barley or grape wine, the harvesting, treading, fermentation, straining and "bottling" of these early wines was labour-intensive and yet in all likelihood it remained a labour of love. Once again, Egyptian tomb paintings clearly show the wine-making process of the ancient vintners--people are often shown cultivating, pruning and tending the crops, while others harvest and transport the fruit to vats where it is tread into a mash and stored in jars and wineskins for fermentation.

The process by which the juice was extracted from the harvested grapes was often by means of a simple bag-press (see the accompanying diagram from a tomb painting at Beni-Hassan). The fruit

was placed into a linen bag stretched out between two upright wooden posts. Workers then twisted bar handles which were placed at both ends of the bag, the twisting motion slowly wringing out the juice from the grapes into a container below. The other method of extracting grape juice for the fermentation process was by means of foot-presses which were often of considerable size (see the accompanying diagram from a tomb painting at Thebes). Men were

made to tread the fruit into a mash until as much juice as possible had been extracted, the liquid either running directly into storage reservoirs or allowed to run off into collecting vats via pipes. The men are often depicted supporting themselves by ropes hung from the roof of the press while others pour the juice into amphorae for storage and fermentation. After a time, the fermented juice was transferred to smaller earthenware amphorae which were then closed with disc-shaped lids and sealed with clay, pitch or mortar which was subsequently stamped with the vintner's or pharaoh's seal as well as the close or year of the vintage. The amphorae were then stored in an upright position until the wine was used or transported.

These storage amphorae were often coated internally with a resin pitch which helped seal the porous earthenware and may have helped in preserving the wine as well. This pine pitch would probably have given the high-quality Egyptian wines a very unique flavour similar to that of Greek retsina wine, which was also produced in a similar way and is still available today for the connoisseur of this millennia-old wine-making process.

Other methods of storage included large cisterns or reservoirs which have been found in conjunction with wine-presses and cellars during archaeological excavations at Near Eastern sites such as Biblical Gibeon. Sixty-six circular reservoirs have been found, each one six

feet in diameter and six feet deep, which served this large wine-trading settlement as both storage cellars and wine-pressing vats. Still others were lined with a waterproof mortar and served as fermentation cisterns.

After processing and fermentation were complete, the wine was transported in the same sort of inverted tear-drop shaped amphorae depicted in one of the accompanying diagrams and familiar to most of us from the Greeks and Romans of a later time. The shape allowed them to be stacked by the scores in both storerooms and the holds of trading ships which plied the Mediterranean between North Africa, Greece, Rome and Syria in an extensive wine trade which lasted through many centuries, many rulers, and many empires.

The trade exchange in wine between Egypt, Greece and Rome formed an important part of the ancient economy of all these great civilizations and is something which will be explored in more detail in future issues of *Labyrinth* as we look into the production of these 'elixirs of the gods' from Greek and Roman points of view.