

As explained in the September 1993 and January 1994 issues of *Labyrinth*, most of Greece has a fairly rocky terrain with a very thin layer of topsoil which makes it difficult to cultivate any but the hardiest of crops. Olives and grapes do, however, thrive in this kind of landscape, and it is these two crops which Greece became famous for very early on. The Greek islands especially were renowned for their grape-growing abilities. Throughout ancient times, the islands of the Aegean Sea east of mainland Greece, and in particular Rhodes, Thasos, Paros, Lesbos and Naxos, were prized for their soil, their vines and especially their export of a variety of vintages to all corners of the known world. Pramnian wine from the island of Icaros, for example, was mentioned by Homer in the *Iliad* (XI.635) as being mixed with water and then sprinkled with grated goat's-milk cheese and barley meal for relieving the harshest of thirsts.

Ancient Wine Production -
The Greek World, Part I

by Chris Mundigler

"For myself I declare that there is no greater fulfilment of delight than when joy possesses a whole people and banqueters in the halls listen to a minstrel as they sit side by side and the cupbearer draws wine from the bowl and bears it round and pours it into the cups. This seems to my mind a thing surpassingly lovely." So says Odysseus in Homer's *Odyssey* (IX.5) and who, in ancient or modern times, could deny such a thing. While ancient Greece may not have had the very best conditions for growing the staples of human subsistence, it did possess the necessary geographic and climatic conditions for growing two very important commodities of the ancient world - grapes and olives. While not as well suited for large, economically-rich crops such as cereals and grains as her contemporaries around the Black Sea and Egypt, Greece was, for the most part, very well endowed for the production of vines for wine and olives for oil, both of which became the basis for her economic growth and trade leadership in ancient times.

Athenaeus in his *Deipnosophistae* (I.30) mentions this same Pramnian wine as being neither too sweet nor too rich, but rather dry and of remarkable strength. The island of Samos, connected with the cult of Dionysus, the god of wine, maintained an excellent soil and climate for some of the best wine known in antiquity. Athenaeus also raves about the quality of wines from nearby Cos and Rhodes. The wine of the northern island of Thasos was mixed with honey for a unique flavour and Homer mentions a honey-sweetened wine given to Hector by his mother Hecabe, who tells him that "in a tired man, wine will bring back his strength to its fullness." (*Iliad*, VI.261). Not only did the Greeks of Andros Island regularly celebrate the festival of Dionysus in thanks for their wine, but they also believed that wine flowed naturally from the sanctuary of the god during the celebrations (Pausanias, *Guide to Greece*, 2: VI.26.2).

The process by which these vine-rich regions produced their many and varied vintages differed little from region to region in ancient Greece. Generally, the Greeks pressed their grapes underfoot, placing the fruit in large wooden vats and jumping in with it, enjoying a communal 'grape-dance' in which much of the village joined in. While any juice which naturally came from the grapes before treading was considered to make the best wine, the initial vat-treading produced enough high-quality juice to make a prized annual vintage for symposia, festivals and libations. After as much juice as possible had been obtained by treading, the mash left over was then placed in permeable sacks and further squeezed for any remaining drops of 'liquid gold'. This second pressing of the grapes produced a somewhat inferior quality wine but one still quite drinkable for the average dinner guest. Not letting any of this precious commodity go to waste, as a final step in the wine-making process, water was poured over the remaining dregs and made into a 'poor-man's' wine to be enjoyed by slaves.

The natural fermentation process which followed the manual juice extraction required at least six months for the wine to reach a stage of maturity where the Greeks found it palatable. Some new, immature wine was consumed, but for the most part the juices were stored in large earthenware vessels, usually in cellars where a constant, cool temperature could be maintained. Depending on the region of ancient

Greece and the type of wine being produced, these clay vessels were often coated with pine pitch, as they were in ancient Egypt (*Labyrinth*, January 1997) and still are today for the uniquely Greek wine called Retsina. The ancient Greeks also sealed their clay wine jars for storage and transport with pine resin which helped preserve both the pitch-flavoured taste and the wine itself. The pines which grew in Greece may have contributed more than just their resin to the ancient art of wine-making. The pine resin which coated and sealed the wine vessels may not only have added a unique sweetness to the Greek wine, but it is also possible that the growth of pine trees may have been a geomorphological indicator of a nutrient-rich soil particularly conducive to the growing of sweet grapes for wine.

The production schedule for ancient Greek wine followed a somewhat different calendar from that of the ancient Egyptians described in an earlier issue of *Labyrinth* (October 1996). January to March saw the previous year's grape vines being pruned and cultivated amidst a great deal of festivity (and no doubt drunkenness) as the previous vintage came to the end of its fermentation process and had to be 'sampled' in honour of the god of wine, Dionysus. New vine cuttings were planted in the spring and the grapes growing on the established vines were carefully cared for and maintained by the grace of the gods (and a minimum of human intervention) throughout the summer months. By September and October the fruit was ready to be gathered and turned into the Greek elixir so sought after in both the domestic and foreign markets of the ancient world.

Once the many varieties of Greek wine had been made, they were either drunk, stored or shipped. Next, once we have joined a dinner and drinking party, we will look at the storage, transport and trade of Greek wine throughout the known world of the time.