

In the last issue of *Labyrinth* we looked at the growing of grapes for wine in ancient Greece and the actual production and processing of this “elixir of the gods”. As mentioned previously, the quality of Greek wines bordered on the exceptional. While the Egyptians, as we have seen, produced an acceptable grade of wine, it was the Greeks who took wine-making almost to an art form, as with most things they did. So good was the Greek wine, in fact, that it was prized throughout the known world and an extensive trade network was established solely to accommodate that “supply and demand”.

Old wine was especially prized by the ancient Greeks as well as their export market. Athenaeus mentions a vintage in particular being aged sixteen years (*Deipnosophistae*, XII.584b) and Homer describes Nestor taking great pleasure in a ten year old vintage of exquisite wine (*Odyssey*, III.388-392). These may have been fanciful tales by imaginative authors, but the tales were no doubt grounded in fact. The Greeks knew their wine and knew how to appreciate a good vintage. While a quality, aged wine like those described by Athenaeus and Homer had a rich, sought-after bouquet, wines that were aged unnaturally were an insult to Greek senses. Artificially heated wines or those mixed with sea water for an “aged” effect were loathed by connoisseurs such as Athenaeus (*Deipnosophistae*, X.429c). A consistently good, potent wine, on the other hand, was especially prized for both domestic consumption and profitable export.

While we generally consider a good wine to come straight from a corked bottle, the ancient Greeks were more inclined to dilute their wine before consumption. Dinner wines, for instance, were usually mixed one part water to one part wine, the host generally dictating just how much water was to be mixed for his guests. As the dinner party progressed, though, the wine became more and more “Scythian” in nature, according to Athenaeus (*Deipnosophistae*, X.426b-c). Scythian was not a vintage of wine, but rather a people living north of Greece near the Danube River, who preferred to drink their wine undiluted. It was this penchant for drinking wine undiluted that the Greeks tried to avoid (often unsuccessfully) because they believed it caused madness in a “Scythian manner” (Herodotus, *Histories*, VI.84).

The wines from the islands of Cos and Rhodes were regularly mixed with sea water to enliven them, usually for drinking parties, but it was also found to be quite palatable for everyday use as well. Athenaeus tells us that a particular bouquet, or *anthosmias*, was produced when new vines were used and fifty pitchers of wine must were added to one pitcher of sea water (*Deipnosophistae*, I.32a-e). The Thasians, on the other hand, enjoyed a richer blend of wine, preferring to mix their elixir with honey and dough made from spelt (a variety of *triticum* wheat). This produced a very smooth, sweet wine which was either consumed by itself or mixed further with hardier, more fragrant varieties of wine to supply yet another enjoyable blend (Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae*, I.32a-b).

The Mydian and Halicarnassian wines of Asia Minor were also mixed with sea water but in a much finer blend than those of Cos and Rhodes just offshore. Athenaeus tells us how these particular varieties of wine actually helped in digestion and were such smooth blends that they did not cause headaches (*Deipnosophistae*, I.32.33).

Sea water was not the only ingredient added to Greek wines to lower their acidity and improve their taste. Pine pitch, gypsum and burnt marble were also added to wines by Greek sources reported in Cato the Elder's work “*On Agriculture*” (23) of around 200 BC. All of this was in an attempt to neutralize the wine, improve its palatability and appeal even more to the Greek sense of appreciation, both at their *symposia* and otherwise.

One of the biggest reasons for the consumption of wine by the Greeks was, in fact, these *symposia* or dinner parties. Described by many ancient authors, from Athenaeus to Herodotus and Plato, they were more than just an excuse to get together and drink. These dinner parties were meetings of minds, stages for debate, discussions of politics and forums for gossip. Anywhere you have a meeting of diverse people and opposing views, thoughts and ideas usually flow more freely if the wine also flows, at least so it was in ancient Greece and Rome.

At these *symposia*, the wine which was served had generally been fermented for about six months in an *amphora* (figure 'a') and was then skimmed to remove any surface impurities. Poured into large in-house containers called *kraters* (figure 'b'), the wine was strained before serving to remove any remaining dregs from the liquid. This straining was no easy process, and the host had to be careful that none of the wine was spilled or made "more turbid than before" (Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae*, X.420d), much to the displeasure of his guests.

The general wine-to-water serving ratio by the host of the dinner party was usually one-to-one or one-to-three, but that proportion was changed readily depending on the quality of the wine or the mood of the guests.

Once the wine and water were mixed and strained in the *krater*, the liquid was transferred from the larger, ceremonial vessel to smaller drinking cups by means of a pitcher or *oinochoe* (figure 'd'). The type of drinking cup or *kylix* illustrated in figure 'e' was especially popular in the 5th century BC and differed in design from region to region.

Even the ancient Greeks preferred their wine chilled, and to accommodate this a wine-cooler or *psykter* (figure 'c') was set up at the *symposia* to ensure adequate cooling of the wine. This special wine jar, sometimes with cooling tubes inside, was set into a larger vessel containing cold water or even snow. The outer cold water cooled the *psykter* without diluting the wine inside.

Drinking parties and regular meals were not the only occasions for the consumption of Greek wine. The Greek god of wine, Dionysus, had to be thanked in one form or another for bringing the appreciation of wine into Greece from Lydia. According to Apollodorus (III.14.7), Dionysus brought with him both the vine and the wine-making process and passed

them on to King Icarius of Attica. Ever since that mythical time, men have honoured the god of wine with offerings and libations of the divine elixir. During dinner parties, both Dionysus and Zeus were praised for their part in the wine-making process - the latter for making it rain and diluting the wine for the first time. This, it was said, relieved man of the insanity associated with drinking undiluted wine (Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae*, XV.675). Plutarch also tells us that libations of wine were poured and prayers offered to Dionysus in thanks for the "medicine" of wine before the drinking and feasting began (*Moralia*, III.655).

While ancient drinking bouts and parties may have been where the story ended for many an over-imbibed Greek citizen, it was by no means the end of the road for the golden elixir of ancient Greece. Next we will look at the trade and shipping of Greek wine throughout the ancient world and its importance to both the ancient economy and modern archaeological evidence of Greek history.