

Even in pre-Roman times, the Mediterranean civilizations inhabiting Italy depended heavily on the cultivation of three basic staples - cereals, grapes and olives. We have already looked at agriculture and grain production in this region in previous issues of Labyrinth, and we will now concentrate on wine production and trade in the next few articles before turning our attention to the third main commodity - olives.

The climate and hillsides of the peninsula and islands we now call Italy seem to favour the cultivation and production of wine in every way. Even in prehistoric times people pressed wild grapes into a juice and watched as it magically and naturally fermented into wine. The Greeks, colonizing southern Italy and Magna Graecia, called this wine-rich region Oenotria - the land of wine. They may have cultivated the wild grapes, but the Etruscans before them also perfected their own expertise in winemaking on the hillsides of the Apennines and left us scant but enticing evidence of their craft in their well-known tombs.

By the third century BC, Rome had incorporated Campania into its realm, and with that the region's rich and fertile farming soils, ideal, as Virgil tells us, for growing grapes (*Georgics* 2.143ff). The Punic Wars caused Roman farming regions to be ravaged by battles and troop movements throughout the latter part of the second century BC. After the Punic Wars, some two million acres of Roman farmland lay devastated by war or abandoned by farmers-turned-soldiers. The Roman government sold off this land, but only wealthy landholders could afford to purchase the land and turn it into huge farming estates or *latifundia*. Since Rome could now import most of its grain from its provinces cheaper than it could produce it at home, these landlords turned to two crops which would bring them the most profit from their land investments - grapes and olives. Many new varieties were brought over from Greece to supplement, and in some cases supplant, the native Italian varieties. Cuttings from selected grapevines were established throughout the Italian peninsula and slowly developed into many of the distinctly Italian wine varieties we are still familiar with today. In regions such as Sardinia, the Phoenicians established a white wine variety, while Basilicata's famed Hellenico vine was brought over by the Greeks to Magna Graecia in the sixth or seventh century BC. The Vulture region of Basilicata still produces some of the finest wines in Italy which are, for the most part, descended directly from the ancient Greek.

While Calabria and Apulia produced exquisite Greek wines as well, the Romans preferred Campanian wines and in particular the Falernum variety from just north of Naples. According to Petronius in his *Satyricon* (34), Trimalchio proudly served a one hundred year old Falernian wine to his dinner guests.

Both the Greeks and the Romans recognized the especially rich volcanic soils of Campania (and in particular those around Mount Vesuvius) as

being excellent vine-growing regions. Sicily, too, had exquisite volcanic soils and the whole southern region of Italy was changed not only by these new viticulture strains, but also by the entire shift of agricultural land away from the small landholders and into the hands of the *latifundia* owners, marking the end of traditional agriculture in Italy thanks to the two cash-crops of wine and olives.

Most Romans found the more northern wines of Etruria to be too sour for their palate, preferring instead the sweeter 'refined' wines of the central and southern regions. The production of wine in these areas was a precise and calculated procedure developed from generations of oenological evolution from wild vines to selected strains of preferred grapes.

In the vicinity of Mount Vesuvius, which gave the region around Pompeii such rich volcanic agricultural soil, vineyards have been found which, through post and root-cavity casting, reveal very neat and orderly rows of grape vines spaced precisely four metres apart and supported by upright wooden stakes. This in itself is supported by Cato who, writing in about 200 BC, tells us that in his time vines were already being cultivated to grow up permanent wooden stakes.

Even more interesting was evidence from Pompeii which indicates that olive trees grew between the rows of grape vines. These vines probably grew up the olive trees for support as well as using the wooden stakes mentioned earlier. This same relationship between grape vines and host trees can be seen in many vineyards throughout the world, including Canada, and shows just how literally intertwined the production of olives and wine was in the ancient world - from field to transport and trade.

These two commodities, grapes and olives, did much to stimulate Roman agricultural development in both the Republic and the Empire and we find that early writers, such as Cato, Columella and Varro, place such a high regard on productive vineyards that they rate grape-growing on the Italian peninsula first and grain production a distant sixth out of some ten staple commodities. This despite the fact that the initial outlay to establish a vineyard was far higher, and the rate of a profitable return far slower, than with any other form of agricultural production.

Wine and olives were important not only to Rome on the peninsula but also became vital to the economies of Roman tributary states and

provinces such as Spain and southern Gaul as well. This, however, only after the time of Augustus when the planting of new and improved varieties of grapes was no longer prohibited outside Italy proper.

Despite the enormous separation of the Roman provinces in distance and the vast regional diversification, the actual production of Roman wine varied little between Etruria, Campania, Greece, the Near East or Spain. It is the production, consumption and trade of this immensely important product of Rome which we will investigate next as we continue our look at Roman viticulture.