

The Greek peninsula is not by nature a place hospitable to Man: almost 80% of the landmass is mountainous and ill-suited to agriculture. Only the remaining area, usually composed of small, isolated plains between the mountains, is arable. In antiquity, when methods of farming were not so efficient as they are today, this meant that there was rarely enough food produced to support the population, and importing food became crucial to survival.

Farming nonetheless was the backbone of the Greek economy throughout antiquity. The average farmer struggled for subsistence on a farm of at most 50 acres (half of which would lie fallow each year), which he could make use of in three ways: tilling grain, growing fruit, and raising animals. The most important of these was the tillage of grain (wheat and barley) since the need and demand for grain was ever-present, despite imports from Egypt and elsewhere. Employing irrigation canals and terraces (to retard erosion of the soil), a farmer could at best obtain a yield of 12 to 15 bushels per acre, indeed a modest figure compared to modern yields. Of course, ancient techniques were time-consuming and did not encourage high yields: the ox-drawn plough did not break up land very effectively, the actual sowing had to be done by hand, reaping was carried out by simple hand sickles, and threshing was performed by oxen.

Fruits were needed to supplement the Greek diet, and many farmers cultivated pears, apples, plums and figs. Most common, however, was the cultivation of olives and grapes, two products for which ancient Greece became famous. Olives had been grown in Greece since the Neolithic Age, the olive tree being perfectly suited to a hot, dry climate. The major drawback to growing olives, however, was that a tree needed about 20 years to mature before it would bear a full harvest. Still, once a farmer had mature trees, he could count on a crop that required relatively little care, and olive oil in fact became a most versatile product--used for cooking, for fuel, and even for cleansing. The grape vine, on the other hand, needed a great deal of tending in order to produce. Vines were planted in long trenches that could be irrigated and were tied to stakes for support. The wine derived from the grapes, of course, was an important part of the Greek diet.

Animal husbandry was the third option for a Greek farmer, and a typical farm might have a couple of oxen, a few mules or donkeys, and a larger number of chickens, sheep and goats. The latter two animals did exceedingly well in the Greek climate and soil conditions, and produced a steady supply of milk and cheese. Rarely seen on the average farm, however, were cattle and horses, animals that required large areas of grassland on which to feed. As a result, meat as such never came to play a large role in the Greek diet (a noteworthy difference from our modern passion for meat in North America). Many Greeks, in fact, would only eat meat after a public sacrifice, when much of the sacrificial animal would be distributed to the people in attendance.

If farming in ancient Greece strikes us as quite primitive in many respects, it is perhaps wise to bear in mind that this same type of farming is still carried on in much of the world today. Canadians are indeed fortunate to produce as much food as we do, enough in fact to feed the hungry of many other nations.