

One of the most widely used and traded commodities in the ancient Mediterranean was olive oil. It was used for cooking, cosmetics, medicines, cleaning one's body, fueling lamps, polishing furniture, repelling bugs and killing weeds. The olive tree and the hard bitter berry it bears were symbols of a peaceful and ordered existence. The tree was sacred to Athena, and was her gift to the city of Athens. The olive, especially the branch, was a peace symbol to the Jews and the Christians. The dove, which Noah let loose from his ark to find land, at last came to rest on an olive branch. The dove with a bit of olive branch in its beak is a well known peace symbol today.

The olive berry does not readily yield its oil. The berries have to be gathered, washed and allowed to stand for some amount of time, depending on the degree of ripeness. Then they are crushed in an olive press; the size of presses vary, from small 'backyard' types about the size of a Volkswagen to big industrial ones about the size of a three-quarter ton truck. An olive press is not to be compared to a garlic press found in our kitchens. The biggest olive presses were capable of producing 10,000 kgs. of oil per year.

Various grades of oil came off the presses. The first pressing generally yielded the more refined oil, such as we would use in our salad dressings today. Then the oil got worse. It flowed down the press into a tank or series of tanks. Slaves skimmed off the amurca, a watery residue left floating on top of the oil as it settled in the tanks. The slaves were equally careful not to disturb the heavier residue or dregs sinking to the floor of the tanks. The dregs and some of the heavier, less refined oil were extremely acidic and their effects on the tanks can readily be seen in excavated pressing factories: noticeably corroded floors and lower walls in the tanks. The less refined oil is still available in poorer areas of the Mediterranean today, and resembles used oil of the sort emptied from cars in smell, colour, consistency and probably also taste.

Amurca, a by-product of the pressing, was generally not used at table, but was handy for lots of things around the house and farm. The Elder Cato, one of our oldest writers on agriculture in Latin (late 2nd century B.C.), has left us many suggestions and recipes for the use of amurca. The oily, somewhat slimy residue was a good weed-killer,

especially useful in those areas where a threshing-floor might be constructed, because amurca also repelled mice and weevils which would eat the grain. You'd want to smear the floors and walls of your granaries to keep the mice away, too. Mixed with bitumen, boiled down to a glue-like consistency and then spread on tree-trunks and vine branches, it was guaranteed to repel caterpillars.

Sheep were protected against ticks and a scab-disease of the skin by a mixture of amurca and wine-dregs, provided they were washed in the sea after the smear-treatment, or at least soaked in brine if sea-water was unavailable. Boiled amurca was also used to grease axles and to polish leather harness fittings and other leather goods, such as sandals. It was used to polish furniture, and here it had an extra advantage: it killed boring worms and moths. Amurca brought a wonderful lustre to copper pots, and also prevented rust. It was even handy for preserving fruit; figs with shoe-polish, anyone?

Besides all these wonderful and useful recipes for amurca, if you had any left over you could always use it to plaster your house: mix well with mud or chalky earth and straw, to an even consistent slime, and plaster away. You'd have a house free of bugs and mice, and no weeds would grow in your house-walls.