

Ancient Olive Oil Production – The Greek World, Part IV

by Chris Mundigler

In the last issue of *Labyrinth* we looked at the extraction and processing of olive oil, the olive farm itself, how the ancient Greeks used olive oil, and some of the economic policies and reforms that were a part of this commodity. Now we will turn our attention to the export market, some of the quantities exchanged and the effects of war on the production and trade of olive oil in ancient Greece.

When it comes to the import and export of foodstuffs to sustain the ancient Greek population, Greece was sorely lacking in one commodity while virtually overflowing in another. Much of Greece, geographically speaking, is either too difficult to cultivate or is not suitable for cultivation at all. With this fact in mind even then, the ancient Greeks found that as their population numbers increased their ability to sustain themselves with grain grown at home was far outweighed by the demand for the grain by a dense population living in a rather small area. As such, the Greeks found it necessary to import most of their grain from areas far-flung throughout the known world, and in exchange for this grain they were more than able to export their greatest surplus commodities – wine and olive oil.

In fact, it may have even been that as more and more grain was being imported into Greece, less and less grain was being grown at home because of the vast export and economic possibilities afforded by the cultivation, processing and trade in olive oil. The Greeks found that fields planted with olive trees yielded a substantially greater financial return than any other crop they had ever managed to grow.

There were other reasons for the immense growth in olive oil production and export. It was realized early on that olives yielded not only a high return, but the oil itself could be easily stored and transported in jars and kept remarkably well for long periods of time with little or no special care or attention. This was especially important considering the distances involved and the remote locations of some of the export markets. During the Mycenaean period (which lasted from about 1600 BC to 1200 BC), for instance, there is evidence that Greek surplus trade goods, including vast quantities of olive oil, were being shipped as far away as southern Italy and the eastern Mediterranean regions of the Levant and Egypt. Some areas of the ancient Near East, most notably Egypt and Crimea (on the Black Sea), where the olive was not cultivated in ancient times, were especially eager to receive this essential product of the Greek economy.

The enormous amount and ease with which olive oil was traded by Greece in ancient times must also have set the standard for trade and commerce in general. We find that on the island of Delos, one of the Cyclades islands halfway between the Peloponnese and Asia Minor, around the first century BC for instance, a veritable “stock exchange” was set up that followed, set and fluctuated with current olive oil production in Greece and her territories. If it was a good year in the olive groves of Cyrenaica in eastern Libya, for instance, as Theophrastus mentions at IV.3.1 of his *History of Plants*, it may turn out to be a good year on the “Wall Streets” of Delos as well, and accordingly for the rest of Greece.

Preserved for us in inventory texts from ancient Egypt, such as the Zenon Papyri (59012 and 59077.267)¹, we get an idea of the numbers involved in single shipments and transactions involving olive oil from Greece in the 3rd century BC. One vessel coming into Egypt contained, among other things, 101 small jars and 255 large jars of Milesian oil from Ionian Miletus on the west coast of Asia Minor. Another brought in 140 small jars and 122 large jars of olive oil from both Miletus and Samos (an island in the Aegean just northwest of Miletus). Considering that shipping varied from dangerous to impossible between October and April in the eastern Mediterranean, there still must have been huge quantities of olive oil exported from Greece in the six good months available to get the products to the foreign markets if the numbers in these papyri give any indication.

Export trade products left Greece from many ports, not the least important of which in the 5th and 4th centuries BC was Piraeus, near Athens. As at most major Greek ports, the harbour at Piraeus had a commercial sector (in this case on the eastern side) which contained specialized facilities for both grain import as well as olive oil and honey export.

But all was not glorious for Greek olives and olive oil production. While the Greek climate is fairly stable, politics is far more volatile. Wars and invasions took their toll on not only the Greek people, but the Greek countryside as well. When you realize that it takes a good 30 years before there is any real return from an olive grove, a single army sweeping through the countryside can wreck havoc on not only the crops, but the entire economy as well. This is precisely what happened, for example, during most of the Peloponnesian War between 431 BC and 425 BC. Vines, olives and any other crops that stood in the way of armies were soon destroyed, either directly by the military campaigns themselves or indirectly by neglect from the farmers who fled before the armies. Despite these setbacks throughout Greek history, the Greeks still realized from very early on just how essential olive oil was to both their daily lives and their economy in the form of export. This can be seen by the importance they placed on the growing, care and handling of the fruit. Some of the reforms of Solon in the 6th century BC (as mentioned in the last article of this series) were aimed specifically at increasing and promoting the production and surplus of olive oil for export. And it seems to have worked – Greece, with the help of this trade and export became a major superpower in the Mediterranean region and olive oil continued to be an essential product of commerce even well into the times when Rome took over the world.

Next we will turn our attention to ancient Rome and the production, use, trade and influence of olive oil in this phase of Mediterranean history.