

Ancient Olive Oil Production: The Roman World, Part I

by Chris Mundigler

Changing our focus from olive oil production in the ancient Greek world (over the last few issues of *Labyrinth*) to the Roman world is by no means a far stretch. But long before Greek colonists brought olive cultivation to Italy around the 8th century BC, wild olives grew in the Mongardino, Bari and Livorno regions of the peninsula (see accompanying map) as early as the Pliocene (5 million years ago), as evidenced by olive leaf fossils found in these areas.

Other evidence indicates that wild olive trees grew all around the Mediterranean basin from Spain to Syria, Egypt to Morocco. It took the Greeks, however, to bring what would become one of the leading economic commodities in the Mediterranean to the Italian peninsula. Sources, both ancient and modern, differ in their opinions as to exactly when olive cultivation first arrived on Italian soil – suggestions as early as 1500 BC to 600 BC vary as much as the opinions of the route taken by the domesticated olive: was it Tripoli to Tunis to Sicily, or Syria to Cyprus, Egypt, then Crete and Greece to Magna Graecia (“Greater Greece”) in southern Italy? or was it the Phoenicians in 1200 BC? Later, when Rome absorbed North Africa, the indigenous people there already knew how to cultivate wild olives and it was the Romans who used the olive to consolidate their Empire around the Mediterranean. But that’s getting ahead of ourselves – back to the Greeks and the colonial introduction of olive growing to southern Italy.

In modern times, the general consensus seems to be that Greek colonists introduced olive cultivation to Italy in the south (Magna Graecia) and from there it spread north to other regions of the peninsula. Southern Italy may have seen vines (grapes) and olives, as well as the Greek alphabet, come to the area around the Bay of Naples in the 8th century BC with Greek colonists from the Aegean island of Euboea who settled first on the Italian island of Pithecusae and then the mainland just to the east – around modern day Naples. From there, the Etruscans may have been introduced to all three of these innovations, and developed them further to suit their own needs in the more northern regions of Italy. From the southwestern colonies, Greek olive cultivation also spread to other regions of Magna Graecia – Apulia, Calabria, Campania and Sicily.

By the mid-seventh century BC, olive growing seems to have been well established in Tuscany, but still at that time olive oil was used not so much for food as we use it today, but rather for lighting, cosmetics and ointments. These Etruscans, who grew out of the earlier Villanovan culture around the 9th century BC, were an agriculturally rich people, enjoying barley, millet, rye, a cornucopia of vegetables and later the sacred olives and grapes.

Due to geographic and climatic limitations, though, the region of northern Tuscany seems to have been the inland limit of olive cultivation on the Italian peninsula. Beyond that, the climate in northern Italy becomes too cold, stunting the growth of olive trees and even causing frost damage. Despite all this, Tuscan olives were still grown in great numbers and even favoured by some because of their distinct taste and character, even though by modern standards (and perhaps in ancient times as well) the yield from northern trees is some 10 times less than in southern Italy. Today, we know that Umbrian

olive oil is especially low in acidity when compared with its southern counterpart, and this may help explain why northern olive oil had such a favourable following over the past millennia.

Archaeologically, the Etruscans are famous for their tombs, frescoes and pottery, and it is through these vase paintings and frescoes – some in Tuscany, some in the British Museum – that we get a slice of ancient Etruscan life and, in particular, some interesting agricultural glimpses as well. We see Etruscans, young and old, harvesting olives by beating the tree branches with long sticks to make the fruit fall to the ground, where it is collected by young boys with baskets. Other scenes show boys climbing the trees and shaking the olive branches to make the fruit fall. From these burial chamber artifacts and paintings, it seems that, like the Egyptians, the Etruscans wanted to be surrounded in death with the things they enjoyed most in life.

Today, many of these trees, just as in Greece, are hundreds of years old and we can only marvel at how little the harvesting of these trees has changed through Etruscan, Roman, Medieval and into modern times.

The olive trees themselves were, in some ways, just as prized as the fruit – the wood was much sought after by ancient craftsmen and artisans, but must have been difficult to come by since olive trees were considered sacred by most cultures around the Mediterranean.

While the ancient people of the Near East and Greece may have cultivated and enjoyed olives long before those of the Italian peninsula, it was up to the Romans and their expanding Empire to introduce all of the known world to olive cultivation and the benefits derived from the little green fruit. It was the Romans who, as with many things, improved upon the old techniques and mass-produced and traded olive oil in such quantities as had never been seen before in the ancient world.

We'll look at this Roman production, trade and transport of olive oil in the next issue of *Labyrinth*.