

# The Ancient Spice Trade, Part III: Greece and Rome

By Chris Mundigler

While most spices in the ancient world were either grown in the Near East, or were traded through the region, Greece and Rome also benefited from this lucrative commodity. From the time of the ancient Greek civilization - when the spice trade between the Mediterranean region and the Far East was firmly established - to the fall of the Roman Empire in the 5th century AD - when this same trade between Europe and the Far East virtually dried up - spices and oils were used for a variety of reasons: personally, commercially and religiously.

It was Alexander the Great in the 4th century BC who inherited not only vast information about spices and the spice trade in the ancient Near East and northern India, but with this information came an increasing knowledge about the characteristics and science - the botany - behind the spices and herbs as well. When Alexander conquered Egypt in 332 BC, he created the major trading centre for spices coming from the Orient and bound for Europe: Alexandria on the Mediterranean coast of Egypt - and it was here that western spice traders met with African and Asian spice merchants. Exotic spices such as cinnamon, cassia, black pepper, ginger and many others traded hands from Arabs to Greeks over the centuries at this Mediterranean port city - spices coming by caravan from India, China and Southeast Asia. From Alexandria these much sought after commodities were shipped by sea all across the Mediterranean world of the Greeks and Romans. As well as being supplied by sea, the Greeks and Romans also quenched their need for spices via overland caravans coming through modern-day Jordan, Israel, Syria and Turkey into Europe - especially the Sinai, Petra and Jerusalem. And it's not just literary evidence that supports this - key centers of Greek and Roman spice trade have been found archaeologically throughout the eastern Mediterranean.

The literary evidence though is quite complete on the subject of spices and the spice trade and it spans many generations of ancient Greek and Roman authors. Bronze Age tablets dating from the 14th and 13th centuries BC from such Greek sites as Knossos on Crete, and Mycenae and Pylos in the Peloponnese tell us a great deal about spices, aromatic herbs and plants used in early Greek periods. We also hear of herbs and spices making their way into everyday diet and food preparation not long after. By the 4th century BC, Greek scholars such as Hypocrates of Kos had added the therapeutic use of spices and herbs to the gastronomic. Hypocrates used a variety of spices in his medicines and Theophrastus of Lesbos, also from the 4th to 3rd centuries BC, wrote about spices aiding in the digestion of food. But Theophrastus even went one step further - while studying under Plato and Aristotle, he picked up an academic methodology which reflected his interest in botany and it is from this time that we have a "textbook" - the *Historia Plantarum* - in which he tells us not only what these plants, herbs and spices looked like, but also where they were found and what they were used for. We still base our classification of these plants on Theophrastus' system today.

The medicinal and therapeutic uses of spices continued through the 3rd century BC and when this was combined with the growing desire for spices in cooking, soon the spice trade became big business. A canal was built between 285 BC and 246 BC that connected the Nile in Egypt with the Red Sea to facilitate trade and in no small part, the

spice trade. When Rome officially took over Egypt in 30 BC, suddenly a whole new world opened up for the trade in spices and herbs. Soon spices were flooding into the Mediterranean from India via the Red Sea, down the Nile to Alexandria and then on to Greece and Italy in large quantities - not just for medicinal and culinary purposes, but also for monetary.

The culinary uses of spices continued to be documented well into the 1st century AD with the first full cookbook we have coming from that period by an author named Apicius. In this extant text, Apicius gives us not only the spices used, but also the flavors and gastronomic delights provided by these spices.

Still in the 1st century AD, before his demise under the shadow of Vesuvius in 79 AD, Pliny the Elder studied and described plants and their uses - including spices - in his treatise *Natural History* which also contained scientific works on astronomy, meteorology and geography.

Another ancient physician and author of the 1st century AD, Dioscorides, also left us a multi-volume work on the medicinal and therapeutic properties and uses of plants and spices in the ancient world called the *Materia Medica*. As physician to the Roman armies, Dioscorides traveled widely and gained immense knowledge of botany and medicine which has survived to this day, being used and copied throughout the Middle Ages to the modern era.

In the 4th century AD, Constantinople (modern Istanbul) was founded by the Emperor Constantine and became the greatest center in the Near East for trade in spices such as saffron, pepper, cloves and nutmeg - all prized by the Romans and all worth small fortunes in that and succeeding centuries.

The Greeks and Romans used every type of spice available to them in their cooking and in their health care - in an age without food preservatives, salt was essential to cure meats and spices such as pepper, cinnamon and ginger made even the least palatable dishes just a little more appealing. One of the most rare, expensive and desirable of spices for the ancient Greeks and Romans was saffron, dating back to the Assyrians, Egyptians and Phoenicians, and extolled by Hypocrates, Dioscorides and Galen for its therapeutic qualities. Known from prehistoric Greek times and from excavations in Knossos, saffron was used extensively as an aphrodisiac, as a medicinal herb, for perfumes and in cooking. Also mentioned by Homer, Aeschylus and Pindar as a rare plant with unique pharmaceutical properties, saffron was one of those unusual spices that was used in all walks of life.

Frankincense also had wide-spread use in ancient Greece and Rome as a medicine (it was an antidote to hemlock poisoning, according to Pliny the Elder); as an aromatic (according to the 1st century BC historian Strabo in his *Geography*); as a cosmetic and as an incense for religious and cultic practices. Myrrh, another gum resin like frankincense, was also used for all the same purposes, with the ancient Greeks believing that it was the tears of the nymph Myrrha who had been turned into a tree by the gods for her misdeeds. Of these two resins, frankincense was the most widely traded out of the Near East west into Europe to Greece and Rome, and east into India and China. Records from the 2nd century AD indicate that at least 3000 tons of frankincense per year went west to satisfy the needs of the Greeks and Romans.

Other important commodities traded in the vast spice networks of the ancient Mediterranean and used in huge quantities by the Greeks and Romans were marjoram

and oregano (used in foods and medicines, with the Greeks also using oregano to crown newlyweds); basil from India; parsley (used by the Greeks as a symbol of victory at athletic events, as well as a symbol of death, and by the Romans in cooking); thyme (a symbol of courage to the Greeks, and used in bath water by Romans soldiers to gain vigor, courage and strength); rosemary (used by the Greeks to strengthen the brain and refresh the memory); and bay leaves (used by both Greeks and Romans as wreaths to crown their victors). While all of these spices were of great importance to the Greeks and Romans for a variety of purposes, one spice was prized above all others, especially in the Roman Empire and the Middle Ages: pepper, and it is this spice - and others traded alongside it - that will take us through the Roman Empire into Medieval times in the next issue of *Labyrinth*.