Wine in the Roman World

Shimmering bubbles rise intermittently through azure-blue waters of the Mediterranean. Schools of silver-sided fish dart about in harmony, avoiding the diver, a species from another world. Using the techniques of underwater archeology, the diver and his cohorts attempt to recover art and more mundane products from a sunken Roman galley off the coast of the Peloponnesse.

When the accumulation of centuries of silt was removed with huge suction pipes, carved stones appeared deep in the skeletal hold of the ship. The building materials, destined for some undisclosed project, served the double purpose of ballast for the ship. Beside the stones, care-fully stacked in countless rows, lean scores of unusually shaped clay jars called amphorae (AM-fuh-ruh). One of the most widely used vessels of ancient times, an amphora is a jar or vase with an oval body, a narrow cylindrical neck, and a large handle on each upper side. The base of an amphora narrows to a point and so has to be placed in a carrier, in deep sand, or against a wall—often with other amphorae. The tapered ends made it easy to tip the jars for pouring. They were manufactured by the thousands to store and transport such products as honey, olive oil, spices, myrrh, nuts, and wine.

Potsherds (broken pieces of pottery) are important keys for dating an archeological find. People in each region, culture, and time period added their own particular distinctions to their pottery—shape, consistency, finish, etc. Many of the vessels, especially amphorae used in shipping, bear identifying marks that specify the country, city, or manufacturer from which they came. From such evidence, it is not difficult to recon-struct a map of the centers of wine trade around the Roman world.

Early centers developed around the Black and Aegean seas following the so-called "Movement of the Vine" from the Caucasians and Mesopotamia westward. Some 40,000 containers have been found around Athens; nearly 90,000 at Alexandria, Egypt. As wine produc-tion continued westward, the Greeks labeled Italy as the "Land of the Lesson reference:
BBS: 1 Peter 4:3

Below: Banquet room floor mosaic of discarded food scraps; Palatine Hill, Rome.

Left: Drunken woman or priestess of Bacchus, holding wine jug.

Below: Bas-relief of harbor scene at Ostia, Rome's main port, where wine was loaded and unloaded for trade.
developed their all-weather road system, eventually connecting the remote corners of their world from Scotland to Libya, from Spain to the Persian Gulf. Where land ended, the transports and galleys hauled the cargo of wine and other products to assigned ports and deposited them for further transport over land. Eventually the Roman empire could boast of 53,000 miles of roads so well made that some needed no maintenance for 100 years.

Corinth provides one of the best known shipping lanes to Bible students. Suppose a wine merchant in Ephesus, on the west coast of modern Turkey, desired some particular vintage of wine native to Rome. Over land carts hauled the bottles, barrels, or amphorae to Brindisi, above the heel of Italy. Ships then crossed the Adriatic to the west side of the narrow Corinthian isthmus. This isthmus is about four miles wide and several hundred feet high. A harbor had been constructed on each side: Lechaion on the west and Cenchrea on the east. Rather than risk the open sea around the Peloponnesian, goods were unloaded, placed on pack animals or sleds, rolled or pulled across the isthmus, and reloaded in ships on the other side. Smaller boats sometimes literally were rolled on logs up and over the isthmus on a track called the “Dolico.” From Cenchrea the ship crossed the Aegean Sea to Ephesus, thus shortening the voyage, exposed to open sea, by about 400 miles.

Wine was an important part of the trade of the Roman world because of the popularity of wine among all classes of people. Since history is the story of kings, most of our information about excesses involves the upper classes. Opinion is divided as to whether indulgence was characteristic of the average Roman. A glutton like Nero and his Imperial table would sit down to a banquet consisting of seven courses. Eggs and honey mixed with wine served as an appetizer. Wine mixed with water accompanied every course. Dessert included spicy foods meant to stimulate a desire for more wine. When guests could eat or drink no more, they induced vomiting so they could start again.

Two biblical writers, Peter and Paul, both indicate the prevalence of self-indulgence. They challenged Christians not to live as they had in the past, like pagans, leading lives that were steeped in “lasciviousness, lusts, excess of wine, revellings, banquetings, and abominable idolatries” (1 Pet. 4:3). Paul challenged the Roman Christians in a similar way (Rom. 13:13; 14:21) and admonished the Corinthians for misusing the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11:20-21).

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