

Voula Lambropoulou \*

## Wine and vineyards in the kingdom of Pylos and the palace of Nestor\*\*

Vines are self-sown in the basin of the Aegean Sea. The season of tanúng this variely cannot be easily determined, because based on the typical samples provided by Botany we couldn't distinguish its wild varieties from the cultivated ones. The Greek word «oinos», as well as its Mycenaean form *Foivos* [wo-no], belongs to a group of words of the same meaning, which can be found in many languages of the Mediterranean Sea and the Near East. The word «ampelos», for which there is no direct evidence in Mycenaean form, apart from a proper noun, which is its derivative [a-pe-ri-ta-wo: *Αμπελιτάων*] and the adjective [wo-no-go-so: *FoivokFς* = *Οίνος*], is believed to be a loan from a Mediterranean language.

Wine is signified by an ideogram that looks like the stems of a vine twisting around a wooden trellis:



The ideogram of wine

There exists another word for vine in the Mycenaean language [we-je-we: *υῆFeς*, nominative of the singular *\*υῖεύς*] which would have not been noticed

\* University of Athens

\*\* The civilization which appeared in Greece from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> century B. C., that is during the late Iron Age is called Mycenaean. In 1939, excavations at Englianos were begun, where the Palace of Nestor, the king of Pylos, was found, near today's Chora Trifyiias in Messinia. Excavations were resumed after the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, after 1952, in the greater area of the Kingdom of Pylos, the tombs and cemeteries, by the famous Archaeologist Carl Blengen and other reputed Archaeologists such as S. Marinatos. At that time, we found out that the Mycenaean people made use of the same script found in Knossos of Crete. The decipherment of Linear B was made by Michael Ventris. Research work was made by John Chadwick, J. P. Olivier, E.L. Benett, Paul Faur, J. T. Killen, M. Lng and many others.

by scientists if it were not listed in an ancient dictionary [of Hesychius (4<sup>th</sup> century A.D.)] where one can find the following entry: «*ῥῆν* the vine (accusative) – nominative \**ῥῆς*, a corresponding Arcadian or Cypriot form of \**ῥεύς*.

A plaque found in Knossos (Gv 863) mentions 420 stems of vine [we-je-we] and 104 figs. On another one, vine is represented by its special ideogram. Moreover, a timeworn plaque of Pylos (Er 880) mentions at least 1100 vines [we-je-(we)] along with figs again.

The king of Pylos must have had a splendid view from the rooftop of his palace of a large part of the Eastern coast of Peloponnese at its most Southern part. On the other side, North-Eastwards, his gaze would stop at the lacy peaks of Mount Aegaleon, 1218 m. high. From the Southern side, the king would see the Mount currently called Lycodemos, to the South of Navarino. The gulf of Navarino forms a splendid port protected by the isle of Sfakteria. Ever though the seashore is shallow, it provides anchorage even for big ships. The ancient Greeks tugged their ships ashore, when they were not in use.

Everywhere in this land, which today remains the same, there are vineyards and gardens of many sorts of fruit and vegetables. The Mycenaean farm workers were regularly coming and going, labouring hard in these gardens, when they were not occupied with business in town. Some owned a piece of land, a kitchen garden or a tiny field near their house, which was built of stones, mud-bricks and stilts. Most towns from this time were more like big villages rather than typical towns. The Mycenaean civilisation is based on agriculture:

Outside in the yard, near the door, there is a field,  
Of four pairs well arranged, where many tall and bushy trees grow;  
There are pomegranate-trees, apple-trees with shiny apples, figs producing  
Sweet fruit and olive-trees, strong and in leaf.

[Odyssey]

This description found in the 7<sup>th</sup> ode of the Odyssey is similar to the description of old Laertes' garden outside the walls of Ithaca, and particular to the series Gv of the Mycenaean plaques, depicting the ideograms of the olive-tree, the fig and the vines. When grapes and olives are mentioned, the signs precisely determine that they concern edible fruits and not their products, wine or olive oil. All farm labourers worked hard with the hoes, mattocks and the spuds, they dug and scooped, they hoed, they cleaned the earth of weeds, they topped the stems of the vines, they gathered the grapes and spread them on fields, or hung them up to dry.

The harvest begins mid-August and it lasts till the end of September. During this time, the country resounds with the voices and the singing of women, who



pick the grapes, and of men, who carry the baskets filled with grapes. Most vines (woi-na-des) are scattered over mountainsides, behind stonewalls: in this way, they are protected from foxes and goats. Vines (we-je-we) often twist around big trees or are supported by small poles. Farmers know, however, how to plant them in lines at a distance of 1,80 to 2 m. apart, how to support them by an trellis or leave them to grow on the ground.

In the Autumn, the farmers plough the fields, in the Winter they train the plants carefully, in the spring they spud them, in the summer they top them and they keep them clean at all times. As soon as they pick the grapes, they lay them on a field for ten days and afterwards they leave them in the shade for another five days in order for the grapes to become like sugar. If they want to make must out of them, they crush them while they are still fresh, in a big puncheon called *lenos* (wine-press); this wine-press is made of curved stone or baked clay. The must flows and is decanted in a bowl placed underneath. A hundred and twenty to two hundred litres of must are placed in tall jars or wooden barrels.

Must is left to ferment and boil for forty to fifty days. It is the moment for great feasts. The Mycenaean people taste for the first time the blood of the god of Dionysus' winepress. The feast of the wine is a special night in the dreariness of daily routine. Thousands of people dance till they get tired. They begin to dance near the winepress or the vat with the wine or around the holy trees; this is more than a dance, it is a real ceremony. Maenads run in the mountains of Boeotia, infatuated by the presence of the god. This celebration takes place again with dialogic songs (the father of tragedy dialogue) and dancing in the month of January, when the wine is ready and in March or in April, when the vines to send forth leaves once again.

There is no reference to wine in the lists for rations; it was perhaps considered a luxury. In Pylos, nevertheless, we have a document (Gn 428) mentioning the giving of wine in small quantities. The largest quantity given to someone was forty-eight litres – as he could be representing a group. Two more groups received only 9,6 litres each.

Archaeologists discovered a very spacious building in the facilities of the palace in Ano Englianios with jars containing large quantities of wine, most likely a wine cellar. This was confirmed by the presence of stamps printed with the wine ideogram and of thousands of glasses with two holes. In the main room of the palace there were thirty-five wine jars arranged in rows. On one of them, one can find the word *melitios* [me-ri-ti-jol, that is, wine with honey. Furthermore, on some of the sixty clay stamps found in the cellar there was a special engraved mark in Linear B indicating wine. This cellar is described in the *Odyssey*, 3, 390-392.

Within the objects exhibited in the Museum of Chora Trifylias, found during the excavations at Nestor's Palace and the nearby cemeteries, there are also

ceramics, where the characteristic Mycenaean double cup, known as *depas amfikypellon* dominates. In the tombs of Tragana, many jars have come to light, representative samples of the early Mycenaean style (1550-1500 B.C.), such as written cups of style *Keftiu*, with an embossed ring that imitates metal models. There are two golden cups from Peristeria and three more somewhat longer golden cups with embossed spirals, a sign of the great wealth of this area during the early Mycenaean era.

Most cups in the Palace indicate the wide use of wine in sacred rituals and in offerings; but mostly, the Mycenaeans offered wine to the stranger in order to welcome and greet him like a nobleman.

Apart from wine, people of that time also added to their Winter supplies raisins, leaving some grapes to dry. The peasant would drink very little wine and he would give almost all his production to the people of the Temples and the Palace as an offer and as a tax, instead of paying.

Greek dark-coloured wine gives off vapour, it is rich in alcohol and is usually flavoured. When it is not offered as a libation to the gods, or when it is not consumed at the formal feasts, it is exported to all offshore populations of the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. It facilitates commercial trade. It confuses the minds of the idiots, such as the Cyclops Polyphemus, and it excites the zeal and the love of warriors, like Achilles or Ulysses. It is possible that some of the approximately twenty types of wine known to the Archipelago during the Middle Ages, like the wine of *Monemvasia*, *moschato*, *atheri*, of *Samos*, *anthosmia* (a sweet wine the reputation of which has reached Madeira in Portugal) have their roots in remotest Antiquity.

The Mycenaean people used to flavour their wine and enjoyed the smell of an old wine, and the flavours of rose, lily, narcissus, and hyacinth. They enjoyed the scent of cedar wood, ebony, and other trees, of which the barrels of wine were made. We do not know if they considered black seeds and damson oil (*ramnos*) to be a flavouring or a purgative or material colouring. Their perception of taste and colours was very different from ours, in such a way that cooking, medicine and magic blended together and confused their roles. Even according to Plato, these consists in three skills or techniques difficult to tell apart.

All the peoples of the Near East, from Egypt to Babylon and from Asia Minor to Peloponnese, regarded scents as the souls of things, the most emotional expression of the personality of people and gods. The satisfaction or the aversion that their nostrils felt for these «essential oils» as they rightly named them, served partly a religious or mystical purpose. Scents, like a limitless script, helped to give a meaning to the world. Full of symbolism, values and final causes, they were not interded to arouse the senses, like today: they spoke to the mind and the heart.



The peoples of the Aegean Sea from very early times knew how to plant, to graft and very carefully train the vines. At the time of the Trojan War, the Aegean people used to drink wine in cups with two handles, and they ate wholemeal bread. They knew how to make use of all the flavours of the Greek land and produce a tasty meal and they offered a flavoured wine that nobody really knows if it was considered to be a drink, a liqueur or the blood of the god Dionysus. His or her intention was to bring people closer or to make them more human. This was their art of welcoming. As proof, we would only have to read the passage from Ode L of the Iliad, where we see beautiful Ekamede preparing an appetiser for old king Nestor of Pylos. We find almost all the data on plaques: on a beautiful shiny copper table with black legs, she serves onions «something tasty to eat with bread and drink», fresh honey, old wine from Pymni, goat cheese, white flour.

The texts give the impression of a fine people, of a wonderful culture, of a people protected by the glance of Zeus and the feathery heels of Hermes. A poor, thin land, full of rocks, deserted areas and marshes. How come this land became so great and so civilised, so important? This vast culture does not consist in the golden masks and treasures of Mycenae, it is the legacy left to the world: spirit, ideas, inventions, morality. And furthermore, a religious, political, judicial, technical and military vocabulary which is still in use. The love for a free discussion, for the exchange of ideas and for competition emanates from the ancient Greeks. Europe was taught so much by the Mycenaean Age, a time when some daring people contested authority, travelled and discovered other lands and other heroes to drink with, to discuss with, to exchange ideas, and to refine themselves.

