

## The Cultural Biography of the Roman Olive

### 1. Production

#### **Olea Europea Sativa** = cultivated olive

Lifespan 500-600 years

spread west through Med. in first half of last millenium B.C.

arboriculture generally late arrival in west cp. cereals

range limited by (a) temperature 4-35 degrees C, and

(b) rainfall (dry soils, not wet or desert)

#### **Cultivation**

Pliny NH 15.1-34 and agronomists

crop every two years (using ancient techniques)

propagated by grafting/cutting etc.

needs pruning, ploughing and manuring

little regular up keep

BUT harvest labour intensive

#### **Processing**

harvesting

milling

pressing

grinders, crushers, presses (various sorts)

multiple pressings

drained into tanks, often mortar lined, to separate

approx. 25% oil from water)

NB. olives for eating: preparation and preservation

#### **peasant economies**

the "Mediterranean triad": cereals, vines, olives

polyculture (good for soil and protects against risk)

nutrition

a cash crop

#### **increased production under the empire (C1-3rd A.D.)**

Guadalquivir

Tunisia

Tripolitania (Libya)

Areas favoured ecologically? by trade routes?

NB: continuing polyculture, not complete crop  
specialisation

## 2. Regional Productions

### **Guadalquivir Valley**

= Baetis valley in southern Spain

Baetis olivifera crinem redimite corona (Martial 12.98)

- surveys by Ponsich
- distribution of olive presses (everywhere)
- distribution of 71 amphora kilns (riverine)
- implications for production and distribution

### **Tripolitania**

Cowper's "megaliths" and Mattingly's research  
big establishments nearer coast (Gebel) probably  
on estates owned by the aristocracies of Lecepis Magna, Oea  
and Sabratha

single press sites in predesert associated with tombs  
inscribed in Neo-Punic

### **Other regions**

Tunisia. Aerial photography shows numerous orchards  
in the Sahel, the coastal regions of the south near Sousse and Sfax. Survey has found  
hundreds of presses in the interior, and nearly half the amphorae at Ostia were from  
Africa.

Gaul. Oil presses known in the Var (South East France). Developed  
around Marseilles in C2nd BC but main period of growth C1st and C2nd A.D. Baetica  
oil also imported in southern France. Quality or Quantity? No evidence of oil exports.

Italy Mentioned by all agronomists and some archaeological traces, but  
not a major crop (unlike wine) and provincial oil imported.

Greece Pausanius 10.32.19 says the oil of Tithonea in  
Phocis is less abundant than that of Attika or Sicyon, but in  
quality it surpasses Spanish oil and is used to make  
perfumes and is sent to the emperor.

### 3. Distribution

#### **amphorae**

forms (weight, bulk, strength)  
capacity 40-80 litres (av. 63)  
stamps to identify workshop (figlina) where amphorae  
made. sometimes an estate, sometimes cater to  
several producers

#### **tituli picti**

Painted labels with a set formula

Line 1: Weight of Amphora empty e.g. 30-35 kilos  
Line 2: Name of exporter  
Line 3: Weight of oil e.g. 70 kilos  
and added under the handle: name of estate,  
(and in C2nd and C3rd consular date, the port  
of emarcation, and control ?tax? stamps)

XXCVS  
LAntonEpaphrodit  
CXCVS  
ActGPrimus  
CharitianumAeliaeAllian LVIIS  
CXCVS Anice

records that Lucius Antonius Epaphroditus bought from Aelia Aliana's estate named Charitianus, an amphora which weighed 85.5 Roman lbs empty, but was weighed by Anictetus at 195.5 lbs full and that the transaction was registered by Gaius Primus. (from Keay 1988, 101).

#### **Shipping**

wrecks (dating use and cargoes)  
capacity up to 10,000 amphorae by c. 100 A.D.  
e.g. Port-Vendres II wrecked 42-48 BC off France,  
carrying amphorae from 10 kilns and at least 9  
exporters

#### **Annona**

imperial officials supervised shipment of olive oil to  
Rome or the legions (*annona militaris*)  
inscriptions record adiutores

#### **amphora distributions**

probs of use (incomplete)  
directed trade and the Rhine?

#### **specialised sellers**

CIL VI 29722 a diffusor olearius ex Baetica of  
equestrian status who was patron of that guild, of that of the  
wine sellers of Lyon and also of the Saone shippers.

#### 4. Consumption

##### **food**

ethnologists report present day areas where  
consumption = 50 litres/ year ie: 1/3 calorific intake  
ancient average approx 20 litres p.a.???  
for cooking (alternative to lard)  
NB. oil lasts only a year without going rancid.

##### **use on the body**

in perfumes and medicines  
baths and gymnasia (in place of soap)

##### **light**

1 litre gives approx 250-300 hrs of light in terracotta lamp  
St. Augustine de Ordine 10.1.3 on its expense in C4th Italy

##### **euergetism/munificence**

*Hadrian's Law* allowing Athens to buy up to 1/3 of  
Attikan production IG III 38 cf. J. H. Oliver *The Ruling Power*  
(1953) pp.960-3

*Oil dole in Rome* from Severus (SHA Severus18)  
"populo Romano diurno oleum gratuitum et fecundissimum  
in aeternam donavit"

*Private gifts* e.g. CIL XI 6520 a benefactor at Sassina in  
Italy left a sum to the dendrophoroi, fabri and centonarii  
"uti die natalis mei oleum singulis vobis.ex redivit HS 4000  
dividatur et ex redivit HS 2000 manes meos colatis"

##### **Quantities consumed**

*Rome*: Monte Testaccio  
40 - 50 million plus discarded amphorae (80-85% of  
which probably Dressel 20's) representing 2000 billion litres  
(oil amphorae can't be reused cp. wine)  
dump = approx 50m high, 150 x 200m in extent today

*Ostia*: Terme del Nuotatore  
1000+ sherds showing changing importance of various  
sources of olive oil over time

*Frontiers*: Annona Militaris

*Britain* imported from beginning of C1st AD  
Dressel 20 = 70 % of amphorae found by 200 AD

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