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 TOM STANDAGE

Author of *The Victorian Internet* and *The Turk*

WINE *in*
GREECE
and **ROME**



The Delight of Wine

Quickly, bring me a beaker of wine, so that I may wet my mind and say something clever.

—*Aristophanes, Greek comic poet (c. 450-385 BCE)*

A Great Feast

ONE OF THE greatest feasts in history was given by King Ashurnasirpal II of Assyria, around 870 BCE, to mark the inauguration of his new capital at Nimrud. At the center of the new city was a large palace, built on a raised mud-brick platform in the traditional Mesopotamian manner. Its seven magnificent halls had ornate wood-and-bronze doors and were roofed with cedar, cypress, and juniper wood. Elaborate murals celebrated the king's military exploits in foreign lands. The palace was surrounded by canals and waterfalls, and by orchards and gardens filled with both local plants and those gathered during the king's far-flung military campaigns: date palms, cedars, cypresses, olive, plum, and fig trees, and grapevines, all of which "vied with each other in fragrance," according to a contemporary cuneiform inscription. Ashur-nasirpal populated his new capital with people from throughout his empire, which covered much of northern Mesopotamia. With these cosmopolitan populations of plants and people, the capital represented the king's empire in microcosm. Once construction was completed, Ashurnasirpal staged an enormous banquet to celebrate.

The feasting went on for ten days. The official record attests that the celebration was attended by 69,574 people: 47,074 men and women from across the empire, 16,000 of the new inhabitants of Nimrud, 5,000 foreign dignitaries from other states, and 1,500 palace officials. The aim was to demonstrate the king's power and wealth, both to his own people and to foreign representatives. The attendees were collectively served 1,000 fattened cattle, 1,000 calves, 10,000 sheep, 15,000 lambs, 1,000 spring lambs, 500 gazelles,

1,000 ducks, 1,000 geese, 20,000 doves, 12,000 other small birds, 10,000 fish, 10,000 jerboa (a kind of small rodent), and 10,000 eggs. There were not many vegetables: a mere 1,000 crates were provided. But even allowing for some kingly exaggeration, it was clearly a feast on an epic scale. The king boasted of his guests that "[he] did them due honors and sent them back, healthy and happy, to their own countries."

Yet what was most impressive, and most significant, was the king's choice of drink. Despite his Mesopotamian heritage, Ashurnasirpal did not give pride of place at his feast to the Mesopotamians' usual beverage. Carved stone reliefs at the palace do not show him sipping beer through a straw; instead, he is depicted elegantly balancing a shallow bowl, probably made of gold, on the tips of the fingers of his right hand, so that it is level with his face. This bowl contained wine.



Ashurnasirpal II seated in state, holding a shallow wine bowl. Attendants on either side hold flyswatters to keep flies away from the king and his wine.

Beer had not been banished: Ashurnasirpal served ten thousand jars of it at his feast. But he also served ten thousand skins of wine—an equal quantity, but a far more impressive display of wealth. Previously, wine had only been available in Mesopotamia in very small quantities, since it had to be imported from the mountainous, wine-growing lands to the northeast. The cost of transporting wine

down from the mountains to the plains made it at least ten times more expensive than beer, so it was regarded as an exotic foreign drink in Mesopotamian culture. Accordingly, only the elite could afford to drink it, and its main use was religious; its scarcity and high price made it worthy for consumption by the gods, when it was available. Most people never tasted it at all.

So Ashurnasirpal's ability to make wine and beer available to his seventy thousand guests in equal abundance was a vivid illustration of his wealth. Serving wine from distant regions within his empire also underlined the extent of his power. More impressive still was the fact that some of the wine had come from the vines in his own garden. These vines were intertwined with trees, as was customary at the time, and were irrigated with an elaborate system of canals. Ashurnasirpal was not only fabulously rich, but his wealth literally grew on trees. The dedication of the new city was formally marked with a ritual offering to the gods of this local wine.

Subsequent banquet scenes from Nimrud show people drinking wine from shallow bowls, seated on wooden couches and flanked by attendants, some of whom hold jugs of wine, while others hold fans, or perhaps flyswatters to keep insects away from the precious liquid. Sometimes large storage vessels are also depicted, from which the attendants refill their serving jugs.

Under the Assyrians, wine drinking developed into an increasingly elaborate and formal social ritual. An obelisk from around 825 BCE shows Ashurnasirpal's son, Shalmaneser III, standing beneath a parasol. He holds a wine bowl in his right hand, his left hand rests on the hilt of his sword, and a supplicant kneels at his feet. Thanks to this kind of propaganda, wine and its associated drinking paraphernalia became emblems of power, prosperity, and privilege.

"The Excellent 'Beer' of the Mountains"

Wine was newly fashionable, but it was anything but new. As with beer, its origins are lost in prehistory: its invention, or discovery, was so ancient that it is recorded only indirectly, in myth and legend. But archaeological evidence suggests that wine was first produced during the Neolithic period, between 9000 and 4000 BCE, in the Zagros Mountains in the region that roughly corresponds to modern Armenia and northern Iran. The convergence of three factors made wine production in this area possible: the presence of the wild Eurasian grape vine, *Vitis vinifera sylvestris*, the availability of cereal crops to provide year-

round food reserves for wine-making communities, and, around 6000 BCE, the invention of pottery, instrumental for making, storing, and serving wine.

Wine consists simply of the fermented juice of crushed grapes. Natural yeasts, present on the grape skins, convert the sugars in the juice into alcohol. Attempts to store grapes or grape juice for long periods in pottery vessels would therefore have resulted in wine. The earliest physical evidence for it, in the form of reddish residue inside a pottery jar, comes from Hajji Firuz Tepe, a Neolithic village in the Zagros Mountains. The jar has been dated to 5400 BCE. Wine's probable origin in this region is reflected in the biblical story of Noah, who is said to have planted the first vineyard on the slopes of nearby Mount Ararat after being delivered from the flood.

From this birthplace, knowledge of wine making spread west to Greece and Anatolia (modern-day Turkey), and south through the Levant (modern-day Syria, Lebanon, and Israel) to Egypt. In around 3150 BCE one of Egypt's earliest rulers, King Scorpion I, was buried with seven hundred jars of wine, imported at great expense from the southern Levant, a significant wine-producing area at the time. Once the pharaohs acquired a taste for wine, they established their own vineyards in the Nile Delta, and limited domestic production was under way by 3000 BCE. As in Mesopotamia, however, consumption was restricted to the elite, since the climate was unsuitable for large-scale production. Wine-making scenes appear in tomb paintings, but these give a disproportionate impression of its prevalence in Egyptian society, for only the wine-drinking rich could afford lavish tombs. The masses drank beer.

A similar situation prevailed in the eastern Mediterranean, where vines were being cultivated by 2500 BCE on Crete, and possibly in mainland Greece too. That the vine was introduced, rather than having always been present, was acknowledged in later Greek myths, according to which the gods drank nectar (presumably mead), and wine was introduced later for human consumption. Grapevines were grown alongside olives, wheat, and barley and were often intertwined with olive or fig trees. In the Mycenaean and Minoan cultures of the second millennium BCE, on the Greek mainland and on Crete, respectively, wine remained an elite drink, however. It is not listed in ration tablets for slave workers or lower-ranking religious officials. Access to wine was a mark of status.

The reigns of Ashurnasirpal and his son, Shalmaneser, there fore marked a turning point. Wine came to be seen as a social as well as a religious beverage

and started to become increasingly fashionable throughout the Near East and the eastern Mediterranean. And its availability grew in two senses. First, wine production increased, as did the volume of wine being traded by sea, making wine available over a larger geographic area. The establishment of ever-larger states and empires boosted the availability of wine, for the fewer borders there were to cross, the fewer taxes and tolls there were to pay, and the cheaper it was to transport wine over long distances. The luckiest rulers, like the Assyrian kings, had empires that encompassed wine-making regions. Second, as volumes grew and prices fell, wine became accessible to a broader segment of society. The growing availability of wine is evident in the records that list the tribute presented to the Assyrian court. During the reigns of Ashurnasirpal and Shalmaneser, wine began to be mentioned as a desirable tribute offering, along with gold, silver, horses, cattle, and other valuable items. But two centuries later it had vanished from the tribute lists, because it had become so widespread, at least in Assyria, that it was no longer deemed expensive or exotic enough for use as an offering.

Cuneiform tablets from Nimrud dating from around 785 BCE show that by that time wine rations were being provided to as many as six thousand people in the Assyrian royal household. Ten men were allocated one *qa* of wine per day to share between them; this amount is thought to have been about one liter, so each man would have received roughly one modern glass of wine per day. Skilled workers got more, with one *qa* being divided between six of them. But everyone in the household, from the highest officials to the lowliest shepherd boys and assistant cooks, was granted a ration.

As the enthusiasm for wine spread south into Mesopotamia, where local production was impractical, the wine trade along the Euphrates and Tigris rivers expanded. Given its heavy and perishable nature, wine was difficult to transport over land. Long-distance trade was done over water, using rafts or boats made of wood and reeds. The Greek historian Herodotus, who visited the region around 430 BCE, described the boats used to carry goods by river to Babylon and noted that "their chief freight is wine." Herodotus explained that once they had arrived downstream and had been unloaded, the boats were nearly worthless, given the difficulty of transporting them back upstream. Instead, they were broken up and sold, though typically only for a tenth of their original value. This cost was reflected in the high price of the wine.

So though wine became more fashionable in Mesopotamian society, it never

became widely affordable outside wine-producing areas. The prohibitive cost for most people is shown by the boast made by Nabonidus, the last ruler of the Neo-Babylonian Empire before it fell to the Persians in 539 BCE. Nabonidus bragged that wine, which he referred to as "the excellent 'beer' of the mountains, of which my country has none," had become so abundant during his reign that an imported jar containing eighteen *sila* (about eighteen liters, or twenty-four modern wine bottles) could be had for one shekel of silver. At the time, one shekel of silver per month was regarded as the minimum wage, so wine could only have become an everyday drink among the very rich. For everyone else, a substitute drink became popular instead: date-palm wine, an alcoholic drink made from fermented date syrup. Date palms were widely cultivated in southern Mesopotamia, so the resulting "wine" was just a little more expensive than beer. During the first millennium BCE, even the beer-loving Mesopotamians turned their backs on beer, which was dethroned as the most cultured and civilized of drinks, and the age of wine began.

The Cradle of Western Thought

The origins of contemporary Western thought can be traced back to the golden age of ancient Greece in the sixth and fifth centuries BCE, when Greek thinkers laid the foundations for modern Western politics, philosophy, science, and law. Their novel approach was to pursue rational inquiry through adversarial discussion: The best way to evaluate one set of ideas, they decided, was by testing it against another set of ideas. In the political sphere, the result was democracy, in which supporters of rival policies vied for rhetorical supremacy; in philosophy, it led to reasoned arguments and dialogues about the nature of the world; in science, it prompted the construction of competing theories to try to explain natural phenomena; in the field of law, the result was the adversarial legal system. (Another form of institutionalized competition that the Greeks particularly loved was athletics.) This approach underpins the modern Western way of life, in which politics, commerce, science, and law are all rooted in orderly competition.

The idea of the distinction between Western and Eastern worlds is also Greek in origin. Ancient Greece was not a unified nation but a loose collection of city-states, settlements, and colonies whose allegiances and rivalries shifted constantly. But as early as the eighth century BCE, a distinction was being made between the Greek-speaking peoples and foreigners, who were known as

barbaroi because their language sounded like incomprehensible babbling to Greek ears. Chief among these barbarians were the Persians to the east, whose vast empire encompassed Mesopotamia, Syria, Egypt, and Asia Minor (modern Turkey). At first the leading Greek city-states, Athens and Sparta, united to fend off the Persians, but Persia later backed both Sparta and Athens in turn as they fought each other. Eventually, Alexander the Great united the Greeks and defeated Persia in the fourth century BCE. The Greeks defined themselves in opposition to the Persians, believing themselves to be fundamentally different from (and indeed superior to) Asian peoples.

Enthusiasm for civilized competition and Greece's presumed superiority over foreigners were apparent in the Greek love of wine. It was drunk at formal drinking parties, or *symposia*, which were venues for playful but adversarial discussion in which drinkers would try to outdo each other in wit, poetry, or rhetoric. The formal, intellectual atmosphere of the *symposion* also reminded the Greeks how civilized they were, in contrast to the barbarians, who either drank lowly, unsophisticated beer or—even worse—drank wine but failed to do so in a manner that met with Greek approval.

In the words of Thucydides, a Greek writer of the fifth century BCE who was one of the ancient world's greatest historians, "the peoples of the Mediterranean began to emerge from barbarism when they learnt to cultivate the olive and the vine." According to one legend, Dionysus, the god of wine, fled to Greece to escape beer-loving Mesopotamia. A more kindly but still rather patronizing Greek tradition relates that Dionysus created beer for the benefit of people in countries where the vine could not be cultivated. In Greece, however, Dionysus had made wine available to everyone, not just the elite. As the playwright Euripides put it in *The Bacchae*: "To rich and poor alike hath he granted the delight of wine, that makes all pain to cease."

Wine was plentiful enough to be widely affordable because the climate and terrain of the Greek islands and mainland were ideal for viticulture. Cultivation of the vine rapidly took hold throughout Greece from the seventh century BCE, starting in Arcadia and Sparta in the Peloponnese Peninsula, and then spreading up toward Attica, the region around Athens. The Greeks were the first to produce wine on a large commercial scale and took a methodical, even scientific approach to viticulture. Greek writing on the subject begins with Hesiod's *Works and Days*, written in the eighth century BCE, which incorporates advice on how and when to prune, harvest, and press grapes. Greek vintners devised

improvements to the wine press and adopted the practice of growing vines in neat rows, on trellises and stakes, rather than up trees. This allowed more vines to be packed into a given space, increasing yields and providing easier access for harvesting.

Gradually, grain farming was overtaken by the cultivation of grapevines and olives, and wine production switched from subsistence to industrial farming. Rather than being consumed by the farmer and his dependents, wine was produced specifically as a commercial product. And no wonder; a farmer could earn up to twenty times as much from cultivating vines on his land as he could from growing grain. Wine became one of Greece's main exports and was traded by sea for other commodities. In Attica, the switch from grain production to viticulture was so dramatic that grain had to be imported in order to maintain an adequate supply. Wine was wealth; by the sixth century BCE, the property-owning classes in Athens were categorized according to their vineyard holdings: The lowest class had less than seven acres, and the next three classes up owned around ten, fifteen, and twenty-five acres, respectively.

Wine production was also established on remote Greek islands, including Chios, Thasos, and Lesbos, off the west coast of modern Turkey, whose distinctive wines became highly esteemed. Wine's economic importance was underlined by the appearance of wine-related imagery on Greek coins: Those from Chios portrayed the distinctive profile of its wine jars, and the wine god Dionysus reclining on a donkey was a common motif on both the coins and amphora handles of the Thracian city of Mende. The commercial significance of the wine trade also meant that vineyards became prime targets in the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta and were often trampled and burned. On one occasion, in 424 BCE, Spartan troops arrived just before harvest time at Acanthus, a wine-producing city in Macedonia that was allied with Athens. Fearing for their grapes, and swayed by the oratory of Brasidas, the Spartan leader, the locals held a ballot and decided to switch allegiances. The harvest was then able to continue unaffected.

As wine became more widely available—so widely available that even the slaves drank it—what mattered was no longer whether or not you drank wine, but what kind it was. For while the availability of wine was more democratic in Greek society than in other cultures, wine could still be used to delineate social distinctions. Greek wine buffs were soon making subtle distinctions between the various homegrown and foreign wines. As individual styles became well known,

different wine-producing regions began shipping their wines in distinctively shaped amphorae, so that customers who preferred a particular style could be sure they were getting the real thing. Archestratus, a Greek gourmet who lived in Sicily in the fourth century BCE and is remembered as the author of *Gastronomia*, one of the world's first cookbooks, preferred wine from Lesbos. References in Greek comic plays of the fifth and fourth centuries BCE suggest that the wines of Chios and Thasos were also particularly highly regarded.

After a wine's place of origin, the Greeks were primarily interested in its age, rather than its exact vintage. They made little distinction between one vintage and the next, probably because variations caused by storage and handling far outweighed the differences between vintages. Old wine was a badge of status, and the older it was, the better. Homer's *Odyssey*, written in the eighth century BCE, describes the storeroom of the mythical hero Odysseus, "where piled-up gold and bronze was lying and clothing in chests and plenty of good-smelling oil: and in it stood jars of old sweet-tasting wine, with the unmixed divine drink in them, packed in rows against the wall."

For the Greeks, wine drinking was synonymous with civilization and refinement: What kind of wine you drank, and its age, indicated how cultured you were. Wine was preferred over beer, fine wines were preferred over ordinary ones, and older wines over young. What mattered even more than your choice of wine, however, was how you behaved when you drank it, which was even more revealing of your innermost nature. As Aeschylus, a Greek poet, put it in the sixth century BCE: "Bronze is the mirror of the outward form; wine is the mirror of the mind."

How to Drink Like a Greek

What most distinguished the Greek approach to wine from that of other cultures was the Greek practice of mixing wine with water before consumption. The pinnacle of social sophistication was the consumption of the resulting mixture at a private drinking party, or *symposion*. This was an all-male aristocratic ritual that took place in a special "men's room," or *andron*. Its walls were often decorated with drinking-related murals or paraphernalia, and the use of a special room emphasized the separation between everyday life and the *symposion*, during which different rules applied. The *andron* was sometimes the only room in the house with a stone floor, which sloped toward the center to make cleaning

easier. Its importance was such that houses were often designed around it.

The men sat on special couches, with a cushion under one arm, a fashion imported from the Near East in the eighth century BCE. Typically, a dozen individuals attended a *symposion*, and certainly no more than thirty. Although women were not allowed to sit with the men, female servers, dancers, and musicians were often present. Food was served first, with little or nothing to drink. Then the tables were cleared away, and the wine was brought out. The Athenian tradition was to pour three libations: one to the gods, one to fallen heroes, particularly one's ancestors, and one to Zeus, the king of the gods. A young woman might play the flute during this ceremony, and a hymn would then be sung. Garlands of flowers or vine leaves were handed out, and in some cases perfume was applied. Then the drinking could begin.

The wine was first mixed with water in a large, urn-shaped bowl called a *krater*. Water from a three-handled vessel, the *hydria*, was always added to wine, rather than the other way around. The amount of water added determined how quickly everyone would become intoxicated. Typical mixing ratios of water to wine seem to have been 2:1, 5:2, 3:1, and 4:1. A mixture of equal parts of water and wine was regarded as "strong wine";

some concentrated wines, which were boiled down before shipping to a half or a third of their original volume, had to be mixed with eight or even twenty times as much water. In hot weather, the wine was cooled by lowering it into a well or mixing it with snow, at least by those who could afford such extravagances. The snow was collected during the winter and kept in underground pits, packed with straw, to keep it from melting.

Drinking even a fine wine without first mixing it with water was considered barbaric by the Greeks, and by the Athenians in particular. Only Dionysus, they believed, could drink unmixed wine without risk. He is often depicted drinking from a special type of vase, the use of which indicates that no water has been added. Mere mortals, in contrast, could only drink wine whose strength had been tempered with water; otherwise they would become extremely violent or even go mad. This was said by Herodotus to have happened to King Cleomenes of Sparta, who picked up the barbaric habit of drinking unmixed wine from the Scythians, a nomadic people from the region north of the Black Sea. Both they and their neighbors the Thracians were singled out by the Athenian philosopher Plato as being clueless and uncultured in their use of wine: "The Scythians and Thracians, both men and women, drink unmixed wine, which they pour on their

garments, and this they think a happy and glorious institution." Macedonians were also notorious for their fondness for unmixed wine. Alexander the Great and his father, Philip II, were both reputed to have been heavy drinkers. Alexander killed his friend Clitus in a drunken brawl, and there is some evidence that heavy wine drinking contributed to his death from a mysterious illness in 323 BCE. But it is difficult to evaluate the trustworthiness of such claims, since the equation of virtue with moderate drinking, and corruption with overindulgence, is so widespread in the ancient sources.



Drinkers at a Greek *symposion*. The seated men drink watered-down wine from shallow wine bowls, while a flutist plays music and a slave fetches more wine from the communal *krater*.

Water made wine safe; but wine also made water safe. As well as being free of pathogens, wine contains natural antibacterial agents that are liberated during the fermentation process. The Greeks were unaware of this, though they were familiar with the dangers of drinking contaminated water; they preferred water from springs and deep wells, or rainwater collected in cisterns. The observation that wounds treated with wine were less likely to become infected than those treated with water (again, because of the lack of pathogens and the presence of antibacterial agents) may also have suggested that wine had the power to clean and purify.

Not drinking wine at all was considered just as bad as drinking it neat. The Greek practice of mixing wine and water was thus a middle ground between barbarians who overindulged and those who did not drink at all. Plutarch, a

Greek writer from the later Roman period, put it this way: "The drunkard is insolent and rude. . . . On the other hand, the complete teetotaler is disagreeable and more fit for tending children than for presiding over a drinking party." Neither, the Greeks believed, was able to make proper use of the gift of Dionysus. The Greek ideal was to be somewhere between the two. Ensuring that this was the case was the job of the *sym-posiarch*, or king of the *symposion*—either the host, or one of the drinking group, chosen by ballot or a roll of dice. Moderation was the key: The *symposiarch's* aim was to keep the assembled company on the borderline between sobriety and drunkenness, so that they could enjoy the freedom of tongue and release from worry, but without becoming violent like barbarians.

Wine was most frequently drunk from a shallow, two-handled bowl with a short stem called a *cylix*. It was also sometimes served in a larger, deeper vessel called a *cantharos*, or a drinking horn called a *rhyton*. A wine jug, or *oinochoe*, which in some cases resembled a long-handled ladle, was used by servants, under the direction of the *symposiarch*, to transfer wine from the *krater* to the drinking vessels. Once one *krater* had been emptied, another would be prepared.

Drinking vessels were elaborately decorated, often with Dionysian imagery, and they became increasingly ornate. For pottery vessels, the classic form was the "black-figure" technique, in which figures and objects were represented by areas of black paint, with details picked out by incising lines before firing. This technique, pioneered in Corinth in the seventh century BCE, quickly spread to Athens. From the sixth century BCE, it was progressively replaced by the "red-figure" technique, in which figures were depicted by leaving the natural red color of the clay unpainted, and adding details in black. The survival to this day of so much black-figure and red-figure pottery, including drinking vessels, is misleading, however. The rich drank from silver or gold drinking vessels, rather than pottery. But it is the pottery vessels that survive because they were used in burials.

Adherence to the rules and rituals of wine drinking, and the ' use of the appropriate equipment, furniture, and dress all served to emphasize the drinkers' sophistication. But what actually went on while the wine was being consumed? There is no single answer; the *symposion* was as varied as life itself, a mirror of Greek society. Sometimes there would be formal entertainment, in the form of hired musicians and dancers. At some *symposia*, the guests themselves would

compete to improvise witty songs, poetry, and repartee; sometimes the *symposion* was a formal occasion for the discussion of philosophy or literature, to which young men were admitted for educational purposes.

But not all *symposia* were so serious. Particularly popular was a drinking game called *kottabos*. This involved flicking the last remaining drops of wine from one's cup at a specific target, such as another person, a disk-shaped bronze target, or even a cup floating in a bowl of water, with the aim of sinking it. Such was the craze for *kottabos* that some enthusiasts even built special circular rooms in which to play it. Traditionalists expressed concern that young men were concentrating on improving their *kottabos* rather than javelin throwing, a sport that at least had some practical use in hunting and war.

As one *krater* succeeded another, some *symposia* descended into orgies, and others into violence, as drinkers issued challenges to each other to demonstrate loyalty to their drinking group, or *hetaireia*. The *symposion* was sometimes followed by the *komos*, a form of ritual exhibitionism in which the members of the *hetaireia* would course through the streets in nocturnal revelry to emphasize the strength and unity of their group. The *komos* could be good-natured but could also lead to violence or vandalism, depending on the state of the participants. As a fragment from a play by Euboulos puts it: "For sensible men I prepare only three kraters: one for health, which they drink first, the second for love and pleasure, and the third for sleep. After the third one is drained, wise men go home. The fourth krater is not mine anymore—it belongs to bad behavior; the fifth is for shouting; the sixth is for rudeness and insults; the seventh is for fights; the eighth is for breaking the furniture; the ninth is for depression; the tenth is for madness and unconsciousness."

At heart, the *symposion* was dedicated to the pursuit of pleasure, whether of the intellectual, social, or sexual variety. It was also an outlet, a way of dealing with unruly passions of all kinds. It encapsulated the best and worst elements of the culture that spawned it. The mixture of water and wine consumed in the *symposion* provided fertile metaphorical ground for Greek philosophers, who likened it to the mixture of the good and bad in human nature, both within an individual and in society at large. The *symposion*, with its rules for preventing a dangerous mixture from getting out of hand, thus became a lens through which Plato and other philosophers viewed Greek society.

The Philosophy of Drinking

Philosophy is the pursuit of wisdom; and where better to discover the truth than at a *symposion*, where wine does away with inhibitions to expose truths, both pleasant and unpleasant? "Wine reveals what is hidden," declared Eratosthenes, a Greek philosopher who lived in the third century BCE. That the *symposion* was thought to be a suitable venue for getting at the truth is emphasized by its repeated use as a literary form, in which several characters debate a particular topic while drinking wine. The most famous example is Plato's *Symposium*, in which the participants, including Plato's depiction of his mentor, Socrates, discuss the subject of love. After an entire night's drinking, everyone has fallen asleep except Socrates, who remains apparently unaffected by the wine he has drunk and sets off on his day's business. Plato depicts him as the ideal drinker: He uses wine in the pursuit of truth but remains in total control of himself and suffers no ill effects. Socrates also appears in a similar work written by another of his pupils. Xenophon's *Symposium*, written around 360 BCE, is another fictional account of an Athenian drinking party where the conversation is rather more sparkling and witty, and the characters rather more human, than in Plato's more serious work. The main subject, once again, is love, and the conversation is fueled by fine Thasian wine.

Such philosophical *symposia* took place more in literary imagination than in real life. But in one respect, at least, wine could be used in everyday life to reveal truth: It could expose the true nature of those drinking it. While he objected to the hedonistic reality of actual *symposia*, Plato saw no reason why the practice could not, in theory, be put to good use as a test of personality. Speaking through one of the characters in his book *Laws*, Plato argues that drinking with someone at a *symposion* is in fact the simplest, fastest, and most reliable test of someone's character. He portrays Socrates postulating a "fear potion" that induces fear in those who drink it. This imaginary drink can then be used to instill fearlessness and courage, as drinkers gradually increase the dose and learn to conquer their fear. No such potion exists, of course; but Plato (speaking, as Socrates, to a Cretan interlocutor) draws an analogy with wine, which he suggests is ideally suited to instill self-control.



The Greek philosopher Plato, who believed that wine provided a good way to test a man's character

What is better adapted than the festive use of wine, in the first place to test, and in the second place to train the character of a man, if care be taken in the use of it? What is there cheaper, or more innocent? For do but consider which is the greater risk: Would you rather test a man of a morose and savage nature, which is the source of ten thousand acts of injustice, by making bargains with him at a risk to yourself, or by having him as a companion at the festival of Dionysus? Or would you, if you wanted to apply a touchstone to a man who is prone to love, entrust your wife, or your

sons, or daughters to him, imperiling your dearest interests in order to have a view of the condition of his soul? . . . I do not believe that either a Cretan, or any other man, will doubt that such a test is a fair test, and safer, cheaper, and speedier than any other.

Similarly, Plato saw drinking as a way to test oneself, by submitting to the passions aroused by drinking: anger, love, pride, ignorance, greed, and cowardice. He even laid down rules for the proper running of a *symposion*, which should ideally enable men to develop resistance to their irrational urges and triumph over their inner demons. Wine, he declared, "was given [to man] as a balm, and in order to implant modesty in the soul, and health and strength in the body."

The *symposion* also lent itself to political analogies. To modern eyes, a gathering at which everyone drank as equals from a shared bowl appears to embody the idea of democracy. The *symposion* was indeed democratic, though not in the modern sense of the word. It was strictly for privileged men; but the same was true, in the Athenian form of democracy, of the right to vote, which was only extended to free men, or around a fifth of the population. Greek democracy relied on slavery. Without slaves to do all the hard work, the men would not have had enough leisure time to participate in politics.

Plato was suspicious of democracy. For one thing, it interfered with the natural order of things. Why should a man obey his father, or a scholar his teacher, if they were technically equals? Placing too much power in the hands of the ordinary people, Plato argued in his book *The Republic*, led inevitably to anarchy—at which point order could only be restored through tyranny. In *The Republic*, he depicted Socrates denouncing proponents of democracy as evil wine pourers who encouraged the thirsty people to overindulge in the "strong wine of freedom." Power, in other words, is like wine and can intoxicate when consumed in large quantities by people who are not used to it. The result in both cases is chaos. This is one of many allusions in *The Republic* to the *symposion*, nearly all of which are disparaging. (Plato believed, instead, that the ideal society would be run by an elite group of guardians, led by philosopher kings.)

In short, the *symposion* reflected human nature and had both good and bad aspects. But provided the right rules were followed, Plato concluded, the good in the *symposion* could outweigh the bad. Indeed, when he set up his academy, just outside Athens, where he taught philosophy for over forty years and did most of his writing, the *symposion* provided the model for his style of teaching.

After each day of lectures and debates, he and his students ate and drank together, one chronicler noted, in order to "enjoy each other's company and chiefly to refresh themselves with learned discussion." Wine was served according to Plato's directions, in moderate quantities to ensure that the chief form of refreshment was intellectual; a contemporary observed that those who dined with Plato felt perfectly well the next day. There were no musicians or dancers, for Plato believed that educated men ought to be capable of entertaining themselves by "speaking and listening in turns in an orderly manner." Today, the same format survives as a framework for academic interchange, in the form of the scholarly seminar, or symposium, where participants speak in turn and discussion and argument, within proscribed limits, are encouraged.

An Amphora of Culture

With its carefully calibrated social divisions, its reputation for unparalleled cultural sophistication, and its encouragement of both hedonism and philosophical inquiry, wine embodied Greek culture. These values went along with Greek wine as it was exported far and wide. The distribution of Greek wine jars, or amphorae, provides archaeological evidence for Greek wine's widespread popularity and the far-reaching influence of Greek customs and values. By the fifth century BCE, Greek wine was being exported as far afield as southern France to the west, Egypt to the south, the Crimean Peninsula to the east, and the Danube region to the north. It was trade on a massive scale; a single wreck found off the southern coast of France contained an astonishing 10,000 amphorae, equivalent to 250,000 liters or 333,000 modern wine bottles. As well as spreading wine itself, Greek traders and colonists spread knowledge of its cultivation, introducing wine making to Sicily, southern Italy, and southern France, though whether viticulture was introduced to Spain and Portugal by the Greeks or the Phoenicians (a seafaring culture based in a region of modern-day Syria and Lebanon) is unclear.

A Celtic grave-mound found in central France, dating from the sixth century BCE, contained the body of a young noblewoman lying on the frame of a wagon, the wheels of which had been removed and laid alongside. Among the valuables found in the tomb was a complete set of imported Greek drinking vessels, including an enormous and elaborately decorated *krater*. Similar vessels have been found in other Celtic graves. Vast amounts of Greek wine and

drinking vessels were also exported to Italy, where the Etruscans enthusiastically embraced the custom of the *symposion* to demonstrate their own sophistication.

Greek customs such as wine drinking were regarded as worthy of imitation by other cultures. So the ships that carried Greek wine were carrying Greek civilization, distributing it around the Mediterranean and beyond, one amphora at a time. Wine displaced beer to become the most civilized and sophisticated of drinks—a status it has maintained ever since, thanks to its association with the intellectual achievements of Ancient Greece.

The Imperial Vine

Baths, wine and sex ruin our bodies. But what makes life worth living except baths, wine and sex?

—*Corpus Inscriptionis VI, 15258*

Rome Versus Greece

BY THE MIDDLE of the second century BCE the Romans, a people from central Italy, had displaced the Greeks as the dominant power in the Mediterranean basin. Yet it was a strange sort of victory, since the Romans, like many other European peoples, liked to show how sophisticated they were by appropriating aspects of Greek culture. They borrowed Greek gods and their associated myths, adopted a modified form of the Greek alphabet, and imitated Greek architecture. The Roman constitution was modeled on Greek lines. Educated Romans studied Greek literature and could speak the language. All of this led some Romans to argue that Rome's supposed victory over Greece was, in reality, a defeat. As fine Greek statues were triumphantly brought into Rome after the sack of the Greek colony of Syracuse in 212 BCE, Cato the Elder, a curmudgeonly Roman who regarded the Greeks as a bad influence, remarked that "the vanquished have conquered us, not we them." He had a point.

Cato and other skeptics contrasted what they regarded as the weak, unreliable, and self-indulgent nature of the Greeks with the Romans' practical, no-nonsense manner. Although Greek culture had once had* many admirable qualities, they argued, it had since degenerated: The Greeks had become entranced by their glorious history and overly fond of wordplay and philosophizing. Yet for all these criticisms, there was no denying the debt the Romans owed to Greek culture. The paradoxical result was that while many Romans were wary of becoming too much like the Greeks, the Romans carried the intellectual and artistic legacy of the Greeks farther than ever before, as their sphere of influence expanded around the Mediterranean and beyond.

Wine offered one way to resolve this paradox, for the cultivation and consumption of wine provided a way to bridge Greek and Roman values. The Romans were proud of their origins and saw themselves as a nation of unpretentious farmers turned soldiers and administrators. After successful campaigns, Roman soldiers were often rewarded with tracts of farmland. The most prestigious crop to grow was the vine; by doing so, Roman gentleman farmers could convince themselves that they were remaining true to their roots, even as they also enjoyed lavish feasts and drinking parties in Greek-style villas.

Cato himself agreed that viticulture provided a way to reconcile the traditional Roman values of frugality and simplicity with Greek sophistication. Cultivating vines was honest and down-to-earth, but the resulting wine was a symbol of civilization. For the Romans, wine therefore embodied both where they had come from and what they had become. The military might of a culture founded by hardworking farmers was symbolized by the Roman centurion's badge of rank: a wooden rod cut from the sapling of a vine.

All Vines Lead to Rome

At the beginning of the second century BCE, Greek wine still dominated the Mediterranean wine trade and was the only product being exported in significant quantities to the Italian peninsula. But the Romans were catching up fast, as wine making spread northward from the former Greek colonies in the south—the region known to the Greeks as "Oenotria," or "the land of the trained vines," which was under Roman rule by this time. The Italian peninsula became the world's foremost wine-producing region around 146 BCE, just as Rome became the leading Mediterranean power with the fall of Carthage in northern Africa and the sack of the Greek city of Corinth.

Just as they assimilated and then distributed so many other aspects of Greek culture, the Romans embraced Greece's finest wines and wine-making techniques. Vines were transplanted from Greek islands, enabling Chian wine, for example, to be grown in Italy. Winemakers began to make imitations of the most popular Greek wines, notably the seawater-flavored wine of Cos, so that Coan became a style rather than a mark of origin. Leading winemakers headed from Greece to Italy, the new center of the trade. By 70 CE, the Roman writer Pliny the Elder estimated that there were eighty wines of note in the Roman world, two-thirds of which were grown in Italy.

Such was the popularity of wine that subsistence farming could not meet demand, and the ideal of the noble farmer was displaced by a more commercial approach, based on large villa estates operated by slaves. Wine production expanded at the expense of grain production, so that Rome became dependent on grain imports from its African colonies. The expansion of the villa estates also displaced the rural population as small farmers sold their property and moved to the city. Rome's population swelled from around one hundred thousand in 300 BCE to around a million by 0 CE, making it the world's most populous metropolis. Meanwhile, as wine production intensified at the heart of the Roman world, consumption spread on its fringes. People adopted wine drinking, along with other Roman customs, wherever Roman rule extended—and beyond. Wealthy Britons put aside beer and mead in favor of wines imported from as far away as the Aegean; Italian wine was shipped as far as the southern Nile and northern India. In the first century, wine production in the Roman provinces of southern Gaul and Spain was stepped up to keep pace with demand, though Italian wines were still regarded as the best.

Wine was shipped from one part of the Mediterranean to another in freighters typically capable of carrying two thousand to three thousand clay amphorae, along with secondary cargoes of slaves, nuts, glassware, perfumes, and other luxury items. Some winemakers shipped their own wine; wrecks have been found in which the name of the winemaker on the amphorae matches the name cast into the anchor. The amphorae in which wine was shipped were generally regarded as disposable, nonre-usable containers and were usually smashed when they had served their purpose. Thousands of amphora handles, with stamps indicating their place of origin, contents, and other information, have been found on rubbish heaps in Marseilles, Athens, Alexandria, and other Mediterranean ports, and in Rome itself. Analyzing these stamps makes it possible to map patterns of trade and see the influence of Roman politics on the wine business. Amphora handles from a 150-foot-high rubbish heap at the Horrea Galbana, a huge warehouse in Rome, are mostly Spanish during the second century CE, following a mysterious decline of Italian production, possibly caused by plague. In the early third century, North African wines start to dominate after the rise to power of Septimius Severus in 193 CE. The merchants of Roman Spain had supported his rival, Albius Clodius, so he encouraged investment in the region around his hometown, Lepcis Magna (modern Tripoli), and favored wines from there instead.

Most of the best wine ended up in Rome itself. Arriving at the port of Ostia, a few miles to the southwest of Rome, a wine ship would be unloaded by a swarm of stevedores, skilled in handling the heavy and unwieldy amphorae across precarious gangplanks. Divers stood ready to rescue any amphorae that fell overboard. Once transferred into smaller vessels, the wine continued its journey up the river Tiber to the city of Rome. It was then manhandled into the dim cellars of wholesale warehouses and transferred into vast jars sunk into the ground to keep the contents cool. From here it was sold to retailers and transported in smaller amphorae through the city's narrow alleyways on handcarts. Juvenal, a Roman satirist of the early second century CE, gives the following impression of the bustle of Rome's streets.

*We are blocked
In our hurry by a surging mass before us, while the
great crowd
Crushes our backs from behind us; an elbow or a stick
Hits you, a beam or a wine-jar smacks you on the head;
My leg is caked in splashing mud, from every side
I'm trampled by shoes, and a soldier spears My foot with his
spiked shoes.*

Having made its way through the chaotic streets, wine was sold by the jug from neighborhood shops, or by the amphora when larger quantities were needed. Roman households sent slaves laden with empty jugs to buy wine, or arranged to have regular supplies delivered; wine vendors wheeled their wares from house to house on carts. Wine from the far provinces of the Roman world then reached the tables, and ultimately the lips, of Rome's citizens.

A Drink for Everyone?

It is not often that choosing one wine over another is a matter of life or death. Yet that is what determined the fate of Marcus Antonius, a Roman politician and a renowned orator. In 87 BCE, he found himself on the wrong side of one of Rome's many interminable power struggles. Gaius Marius, an elderly general, had seized power and was ruthlessly hunting down supporters of his rival, Sulla. Marcus Antonius sought refuge in the house of an associate of far lower social

status, hoping that nobody would think of looking for him in such a poor man's house. His host, however, unwittingly gave him away by sending his servant out to buy wine worthy of such a distinguished guest. The servant went to the neighborhood wine shop and, after tasting what was on offer, asked for a far better and more expensive wine than usual. When the vintner asked why, the servant revealed the identity of his master's guest. The vintner went straight to Marius, who dispatched a handful of soldiers to kill Marcus Antonius. Yet having burst into his room, the soldiers could not bring themselves to kill him, such was the power of his oratory. Eventually, their commanding officer, who was waiting outside, went in to see what was happening. Denouncing his men as cowards, he drew his sword and beheaded Marcus Antonius himself.

Like the Greeks before them, the Romans regarded wine as a universal staple. It was drunk by both caesar and slave alike. But the Romans took Greek connoisseurship to new heights. Marcus Antonius's host would not have dreamed of serving him the lesser wine he drank himself. Wine became a symbol of social differentiation, a mark of the wealth and status of the drinker. The disparity between Roman society's richest and poorest members was reflected in the contents of their wine goblets. For wealthy Romans, the ability to recognize and name the finest wines was an important form of conspicuous consumption; it showed that they were rich enough to afford the finest wines and had spent time learning which was which.

The finest wine of all, by universal assent, was Falernian, an Italian wine grown in the region of Campania. Its name became a byword for luxury and is still remembered today. Falernian had to be made from vines growing in strictly defined regions on the slopes of Mount Falernus, a mountain south of the city of Neapolis (modern Naples). Caucine Falernian was grown on the highest slopes; Faustian Falernian, deemed the best kind, was grown in the middle, on the estate of Faustus, son of the dictator Sulla; and wine grown on the lower slopes was known simply as Falernian. The finest Falernian was a white wine, generally aged for at least ten years and ideally for much longer, until it turned golden in color. The limited production area and the fashion for long aging made Falernian extremely expensive, so it naturally became the wine of the elite. It was even said to have had divine origins: The wandering wine god Bacchus (the Roman version of the Greek god Dionysus) supposedly covered Mount Falernus with vines in gratitude to a noble farmer who, unaware of the god's identity, offered him shelter for the night. Bacchus, the story goes, also turned all the milk in the man's

house into wine.

By far the most famous Falernian vintage was that of 121 BCE, known as Opimian Falernian after Opimius, who held the office of consul that year. This wine was drunk by Julius Caesar during the first century BCE, and 160-year-old Opimian was served to the emperor Caligula in 39 CE. Martial, a first-century Roman poet, described Falernian as "immortal," though the Opimian vintage was probably undrinkable by this time. Other high-ranking Roman wines included Caecuban, Surrentine, and Setine, which was popular in summer, mixed with snow brought down from the mountains. Some Roman writers, including Pliny the Elder, denounced the fashion for cold drinks prepared in this way as yet another example of the decadence of the times, complaining that it was unnatural, since it went against the seasons. And while traditionalists called for a return to old-fashioned Roman frugality, others worried that ostentatious spending on food and drink might provoke the wrath of the poor.

Accordingly, numerous "sumptuary laws" were passed to try to restrain the luxurious tastes of Rome's richest citizens. That so many such laws were passed demonstrates that they were rarely obeyed or enforced. One law, passed in 161 BCE, specified the amount that could be spent on food and entertainment on each day of the month; later laws introduced special rules for weddings and funerals, regulated what sorts of meat could or could not be served, and banned certain foods from being served altogether. Other rules stipulated that men could not wear silk garments; that gold vases were only to be used in religious ceremonies; and that dining rooms had to be built with windows facing outward, so officials could check that no rules were being broken. By the time of Julius Caesar, inspectors sometimes loitered in markets or burst into banquets to confiscate banned foodstuffs, and menus had to be submitted for review by state officials.

While the richest Romans drank the finest wines, poorer citizens drank lesser vintages, and so on down the social ladder. So fine was the calibration of wine with status that drinkers at a Roman banquet, or *convivium*, would be served different wines depending on their positions in society. This was just one of the many ways in which the *convivium* differed from its Greek prototype, the *symposion*. Where the *symposion* was, at least in theory, a forum in which the participants drank as equals from a shared *krater*, pursuing pleasure and perhaps philosophical enlightenment, the *convivium* was an opportunity to emphasize social divisions, not to set them aside in a temporary alcoholic haze.

Like the Greeks, the Romans drank their wine in the "civilized" manner, namely, mixed with water, which was brought into their cities via elaborate aqueducts. Each drinker, however, usually mixed wine and water for himself, and the communal *krater* was, it seems, rarely used. The seating arrangement was less egalitarian than that of the *symposion* too, since some seats were associated with higher status than others. The *convivium* reflected the Roman class system, which was based on the notion of patrons and clients. Client citizens depended on patrons, who in turn depended on patrons of their own, and each patron provided benefits (such as a financial allowance, legal advice, and political influence) to clients in return for specific duties. Clients were expected to accompany their patrons to the Forum each morning, for example; the size of each patron's entourage was a sign of his power. If a patron invited a client to a *convivium*, however, the client would often find himself being served inferior food and wine to those of other guests and might find himself the butt of the other guests' jokes. Pliny the Younger, writing in the late first century CE, described a dinner at which fine wine was served to the host and his friends, second-rate wine to other guests, and third-rate wine to freedmen (former slaves).

These coarser, cheaper wines were often adulterated with various additives, either to serve as preservatives or to conceal the fact that they had spoiled. Pitch, which was sometimes used to seal amphorae, was occasionally added to wine as a preservative, as were small quantities of salt or seawater, a practice inherited from the Greeks. Columella, a Roman agricultural writer of the first century CE, claims that when used carefully, such preservatives could be added to wine without affecting its taste. They could even improve it; one of his recipes, for a white wine fermented with seawater and fenugreek, produces a sharp, nutty wine very similar to a modern dry sherry. *Mulsum*, a mixture of wine and honey, emerged as a fashionable aperitif during the reign of Tiberius in the early first century, while *rosatum* was a similar drink flavored with roses. But herbs, honey, and other additives were more commonly added to lesser wines to conceal their imperfections. Some Romans even carried herbs and other flavorings with them while traveling, to improve the taste of bad wine. While modern wine drinkers may turn up their noses at the Greek and Roman use of additives, it is not that different from the modern use of oak as a flavoring agent, often to make otherwise unremarkable wines more palatable.



Wine drinkers at an elaborate Roman feast

Below these adulterated wines was *posca*, a drink made by mixing water with wine that had turned sour and vinegarlike. *Posca* was commonly issued to Roman soldiers when better wines were unavailable, for example, during long campaigns. It was, in effect, a form of portable water-purification technology for the Roman army. When a Roman soldier offered Jesus Christ a sponge dipped in wine during his crucifixion, the wine in question would have been *posca*. Finally, at the bottom of the Roman scale of wines was *lora*, the drink normally served to slaves, which hardly qualified as wine at all. It was made by soaking

and pressing the skins, seeds, and stalks left over from wine making to produce a thin, weak, and bitter wine. From the legendary Falernian down to lowly *lora*, there was a wine for every rung on the social ladder.

Wine and Medicine

One of the greatest wine tastings in history took place around 170 CE in the imperial cellars in Rome. Here, at the center of the known world, was the finest collection of wines available anywhere, a collection built up by successive emperors for whom cost was no object. Into these cool, damp cellars, pierced with shafts of sunlight, descended Galen, personal physician to the emperor Marcus Aurelius, on a singular mission: to find the best wine in the world.

Galen was born in Pergamon (now Bergama, in modern Turkey), a city in the Greek-speaking eastern part of the Roman Empire. As a youth, he studied medicine in Alexandria and then traveled in Egypt, where he learned about Indian and African remedies. Building on the earlier ideas of Hippocrates, Galen believed that illness was the result of an imbalance of the body's four "humors": blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile. Surplus humors could accumulate in particular parts of the body and were associated with particular temperaments; a buildup of black bile in the spleen, for example, made one melancholic, sleepless, and irritable. The humors could be brought back into balance using techniques such as bloodletting. Different foodstuffs, which were deemed to be hot or cold, wet or dry, could also influence the humors: Cold and wet foods were thought to produce phlegm; hot and dry foods, yellow bile. This systematic approach, promoted by Galen's voluminous writings, was hugely influential and was the basis of Western medicine for more than a thousand years. That it was utter nonsense only became clear in the nineteenth century.

Galen's interest in wine was mainly, though not entirely, professional. As a young doctor he had treated gladiators, using wine to disinfect their wounds, a common practice at the time. Wine, like other foodstuffs, could also be used to regulate the humors. Galen regularly prescribed wine and wine-based remedies for the emperor. Within the framework of the theory of humors, wine was regarded as being hot and dry, so that it promoted yellow bile and reduced phlegm. This meant wine was to be avoided by anyone suffering from a fever (a hot and dry disease) but could be taken as a remedy for a cold (a cold and wet disease). The better the wine, Galen believed, the more medically effective it

was; "always try to get the best," he advised in his writings. Since he was treating the emperor, Galen wanted to ensure that he was prescribing the finest possible vintage. Accompanied by a cellarman to open and reseal the amphorae, he duly headed straight for the Falernian.

"Since all that is best from every part of the world finds its way to the great ones of the earth," Galen wrote, "from their excellence must be chosen the very best for the greatest of them all. So, in execution of my duty, I deciphered the vintage marks on the amphorae of every Falernian wine and submitted to my palette every wine over 20 years old. I kept on until I found a wine without a trace of bitterness. An ancient wine which has not lost its sweetness is the best of all." Alas, Galen did not record the year of the Faustian Falernian vintage he eventually deemed most suitable for medical use by the emperor. But having identified it, he insisted that Marcus Aurelius should use that wine, and no other, for medical purposes. This included washing down his daily medicine, a universal antidote designed to protect the emperor against illness generally, and poisoning in particular.

The notion of such an antidote had been pioneered in the first century BCE by Mithradates, the king of Pontus, a region in what is now northern Turkey. He conducted a series of experiments, in which dozens of prisoners were given various deadly poisons, in order to determine the most effective antidote in each case. Eventually, he settled on a mixture of forty-one antidote ingredients, to be taken daily. It tasted disgusting (diced viper's flesh was one ingredient) but meant that Mithradates no longer had to worry about being poisoned. He was eventually overthrown by his son. The story goes that, holed up in a tower, the king tried to kill himself but, ironically, found that no poison had any effect. Finally, he had to ask one of his guards to stab him to death.

Galen extended Mithradates' recipe considerably. His recipe for theriac—a universal antidote to poisons, and a general cure-all—contained seventy-one ingredients, including ground-up lizards, poppy juice, spices, incense, juniper berries, ginger, hemlock seed, raisins, fennel, aniseed, and liquorice. It is hard to imagine that Marcus Aurelius was able to appreciate the taste of Falernian after swallowing such a mixture, but he did as his eminent doctor told him, and washed it down with the world's greatest wine.

Why Christians Drink Wine and Muslims Do Not

Marcus Aurelius died in 180 CE, not from poisoning but from illness. For the last week of his life he consumed only theriac and Falernian wine. The end of his reign, a period of relative peace, stability, and prosperity, is often taken to mark the end of the golden age of Rome. There followed a succession of short-lived emperors, almost none of whom died of natural causes, and who did their best to defend the empire from the onslaught of barbarians from all sides. Lying on his deathbed in 395 CE, the emperor Theodosius I divided the empire into western and eastern halves, each to be ruled by one of his sons, in an attempt to make it easier to defend. But the western empire soon crumbled: The Visigoths, a Germanic tribe, sacked Rome in 410 CE and then established a kingdom covering much of Spain and western Gaul. Rome was plundered again in 455 CE by the Vandals, and before long the western empire had been carved up into a multitude of separate kingdoms.

According to centuries-old Roman and Greek prejudices, the influx of the northern tribes ought to have displaced the civilized wine-drinking culture in favor of beer-drinking barbarism. Yet despite their reputation as vulgar beer lovers, the tribes of northern Europe, where the climate was less suitable for viticulture, had nothing against wine. Of course, many aspects of Roman life were swept away, trade was disrupted, and the availability of wine in some regions diminished; Romanized Britons seem to have switched from wine back to beer as the empire crumbled, for example. But there was also cultural fusion between Roman, Christian, and Germanic traditions as new rulers took over from the Romans. One example of continuity was the widespread survival of Mediterranean wine-drinking culture, which was deep-rooted enough to survive the passing of its Greek and Roman parents. The Visigothic law code, for instance, drawn up between the fifth and seventh centuries, specified detailed punishments for anyone who damaged a vineyard—hardly what you would expect of barbarians.

Another factor in maintaining the wine-drinking culture was its close association with Christianity, the rise of which during the first millennium elevated wine to a position of utmost symbolic significance. According to the Bible, Christ's first miracle, at the beginning of his ministry, was the transformation of six jars of water into wine at a wedding near the Sea of Galilee. Christ told several parables about wine and often likened himself to a vine: "I am the vine, you are the branches," he told his followers. Christ's offering of wine to his disciples at the Last Supper then led to its role in the Eucharist, the central Christian ritual in

which bread and wine symbolize Christ's body and blood. This was, in many ways, a continuation of the tradition established by members of the cults of Dionysus and his Roman incarnation, Bacchus. The Greek and Roman wine gods, like Christ, were associated with wine-making miracles and resurrection after death; their worshipers, like Christians, regarded wine drinking as a form of sacred communion. Yet there are also marked differences. The Christian ritual is nothing like its Dionysian counterpart, and while the former involves very small quantities of wine, the latter calls for large quantities drunk in excess.

It has been suggested that the Christian church's need for communion wine played an important role in keeping wine production going during the dark ages after the fall of Rome. That is an exaggeration, however, despite the close links between Christianity and wine. The amount of wine required for the Eucharist was miniscule, and by 1100 it was increasingly the case that only the celebrating priest drank wine from the chalice, while the congregation just received bread. Most wine produced by vineyards on church land, or attached to monasteries, was for everyday consumption by those in religious orders. Benedictine monks, for example, received a daily ration of about half a pint of wine. In some cases, the sale of wine made on church land was a valuable source of income.

Although the wine culture remained reasonably intact in Christian Europe, drinking patterns changed dramatically in other parts of the former Roman world, as a result of the rise of Islam. Its founder, the prophet Muhammad, was born around 570 CE. At the age of forty he felt himself called to become a prophet, and experienced a series of visions during which the Koran was revealed to him by Allah. Muhammad's new teachings made him unpopular in Mecca, a city whose prosperity depended on the traditional Arab religion, so he fled to Medina, where his following grew. By the time of Muhammad's death in 632 CE, Islam had become the dominant faith in most of Arabia. A century later, his adherents had conquered all of Persia, Mesopotamia, Palestine and Syria, Egypt and the rest of the northern African coast, and most of Spain. Muslims' duties include frequent prayer, almsgiving, and abstention from alcoholic drinks.

Tradition has it that Muhammad's proscription of alcohol followed a fight between two of his disciples during a drinking party. When the prophet sought divine guidance about how to prevent such incidents, Allah's reply was uncompromising: "Wine and games of chance . . . are abominations devised by Satan. Avoid them, so that you may prosper. Satan seeks to stir up enmity and hatred among you by means of wine and gambling, and to keep you from

remembrance of Allah and from your prayers. Will you not abstain from them?" The punishment for anyone who broke this rule was duly set at forty lashes. It seems likely, however, that the Muslim ban on alcohol was also the result of wider cultural forces. With the rise of Islam, power shifted away from the peoples of the Mediterranean coast and toward the desert tribes of Arabia. These tribes expressed their superiority over the previous elites by replacing wheeled vehicles with camels, chairs and tables with cushions, and by banning the consumption of wine, that most potent symbol of sophistication. In so doing, Muslims signaled their rejection of the old notions of civilization. Wine's central role in the rival creed of Christianity also predisposed Muslims against it; even its medical use was banned. After much argument the prohibition was extended to other alcoholic drinks too. As Islam spread, so did the prohibition of alcohol.

The ban on alcohol was, however, enforced more rigorously in some places than in others. Wine was celebrated in the work of Abu Nouwas and other Arab poets, and production continued in Spain and Portugal, for example, even though it was technically illegal. And the fact that Muhammad himself was said to have enjoyed lightly fermented date wine led some Spanish Muslims to argue that his objection was not so much to wine itself as to overindulgence. Only wine made from grapes had been explicitly banned, presumably on the basis of its strength; therefore, grape wine ought to be allowed, provided it was diluted so that its strength did not exceed that of date wine. This fancy interpretative footwork was controversial but did provide some leeway. Indeed, wine-drinking parties akin to Greek *symposia* seem to have been popular in some parts of the Muslim world. Mixing wine with water, after all, reduced its potency considerably and seemed to conform with Muhammad's vision of paradise: a garden in which the righteous "shall drink of a pure wine, tempered with the water of Tasnim, a spring at which the favored will refresh themselves."

The advance of Islam into Europe was halted in 732 CE at the Battle of Tours, in central France, where the Arab troops were defeated by Charles Martel, the most charismatic of the princes of the Frankish kingdom that roughly corresponds with modern France. This battle, one of the turning points in world history, marked the high-water mark of Arab influence in Europe. The subsequent crowning of Martel's grandson, Charlemagne, as Holy Roman Emperor in 800 CE heralded the start of a period of consolidation and eventual reinvigoration of European culture.

The King of Drinks

"Woe is me!" wrote Alcuin, a scholar who was one of Charlemagne's advisers, to a friend during a visit to England in the early ninth century CE. "The wine is gone from our wineskins and bitter beer rages in our bellies. And because we have it not, drink in our name and lead a joyful day." Alcuin's lament illustrates that wine was scarce in England, as it was elsewhere in northern Europe. In these parts, where wine could not be produced locally but had to be imported, beer and mead (and a hybrid drink in which cereal grains were fermented with honey) predominated instead. The distinction between beer in northern Europe and wine in the south persists to this day. Modern European drinking patterns crystallized during the middle of the first millennium and were largely determined by the reach of Greek and Roman influences.

Wine drinking, usually in moderation and with meals, still predominates in the south of Europe, within the former boundaries of the Roman Empire. In the north of Europe beyond the reach of Roman rule, beer drinking, typically without the accompaniment of food, is more common. Today, the world's leading producers of wine are France, Italy, and Spain; and the people of Luxembourg, France, and Italy are the leading consumers of wine, drinking an average of around fifty-five liters per person per year. The countries where the most beer is consumed, in contrast, would mostly have been regarded as barbarian territory by the Romans: Germany, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, the Czech Republic, Britain, and Ireland.

Greek and Roman attitudes toward wine, themselves founded on earlier Near Eastern traditions, have survived in other ways, too, and have spread around the world. Wherever alcohol is drunk, wine is regarded as the most civilized and cultured of drinks. In those countries, wine, not beer, is served at state banquets and political summits, an illustration of wine's enduring association with status, power, and wealth.

Wine also provides the greatest scope for connoisseurship and social differentiation. Appreciation of wines from different places began with the Greeks, and the link between the type of wine and the social status of the drinker was strengthened by the Romans. The *symposion* and *convivium* live on in the modern suburban dinner party, where wine fuels an almost ritual discussion of certain topics (politics, business, career advancement, house prices) in a slightly formal atmosphere with particular rules about the order in which food is

consumed, the placement of cutlery, and so on. The host is responsible for the choice of wine, and the selection is expected to reflect the importance of the occasion and the social standing of both the host and his guests. It is a scene that a time-traveling Roman would recognize at once.