The Beginnings of Winemaking and Viniculture in the Ancient Near East and Egypt

Patrick E. McGovern, Ulrich Hartung, Virginia R. Badler, Donald L. Glusker, and Lawrence J. Exner

T

he origins of winemaking and viniculture are shrouded in the mists of human prehistory. Scenarios of how wine might have been discovered, however, are easily conjured up. One can imagine a group of early humans foraging in a river valley, denue with vegetation. They are captivated by brightly colored berries hanging in large clusters from thickets of vines and further enticed by the tart, sugary taste of the fruit. They gather up as many berries as possible, perhaps into an animal hide or even a crudely fashioned wooden container. Some grapes rupture and exude their juice under the accumulated weight of the fruit. As the grapes are gradually eaten over the next day or two, this juice will ferment, owing to the natural yeast “bloom” on the skins, and become a low-alcohol wine. Reaching the bottom of the “barrel,” our imagined caveman or woman will sample the concoction and be pleasantly surprised by the aromatic and mildly intoxicating beverage. Additional intentional squeezings and tastings might ensue.

Other circumstances could have spurred on the discovery. Under the right climatic conditions, grapes will literally “ferment on the vine.” The berries are attacked by molds, which concentrate the sugar and yield a product of higher alcoholic content upon fermentation. Observable humans, such as our prehistoric ancestors must have been present, will see various animals, especially birds, eagerly eating the grapes, followed by some uncoordinated muscular movements, and possibly will carry out experimentation of their own.

The greatest obstacle in the way of substantiating a “Paleolithic hypothesis” is the improbability of finding a preserved container with intact organic material or microorganisms that can be identified as exclusive-ly due to wine. For example, leather or wooden contain-ers are yet to be recovered. It is possible that stone ves-sels or even a crevice in a rock might have been used. However, the stone vessels recovered from Paleolithic sites are not closed containers of a type that can be read-il-ly stopped. Consequently, any Paleolithic wine made in a stone receptacle must have been produced only dur-ing the fall when the grapes matured, and must have been drunk quickly before it turned to vinegar.

NEOLITHIC WINEMAKING AND VINICULTURE

If winemaking is best understood as an intentional human activity rather than a seasonal happenstance, then the Neolithic period, from about 8000 to 4000 BC, is the first time in human prehistory when the necessary preconditions for this momentous innovation came together.

Most importantly, Neolithic communities of the ancient Near East and Egypt were permanent, year-round settlements that were made possible by domesticated plants and animals, such as cereals and ruminants. With a more secure, although more restricted, food supply than nomadic groups and with a more stable base of operations, a Neolithic “cuisine” emerged. Using a variety of food processing techniques—fermentation, soaking, heating, spicing—Neolithic peoples are credited with first producing bread, beer, and undoubtedly an array of meat and grain entrées that we continue to enjoy today.

Crafts important in food preparation, storage, and serving advanced in tandem with the new cuisine. Of special significance is the appearance of pottery ves-sels around 6000 BC. The plasticity of clay made it an ideal material for forming shapes such as narrowed-mouthed vats and storage jars for producing and keep-